



Twelve by darthstormer

Category: Stranger Things, 2016

Genre: Adventure, Hurt-Comfort

Language: English

Characters: Eleven/Jane H., J. Hopper, Mike W.

Status: Completed

Published: 2017-12-03 19:07:14

Updated: 2018-04-13 16:36:43

Packaged: 2019-12-16 22:56:19

Rating: T

Chapters: 29

Words: 90,350

Publisher: www.fanfiction.net

Summary: Jane Hopper is finally living the quiet, happy life she deserves with the friends and family who love her. Out of the woods and out of hiding, she is almost done with her first year of high school. Now glimmers of her past threaten to tear apart the stable life she has worked so hard to build.

1. Prologue

Prologue

Hawkins Lab

July 19, 1976

Dr. Martin Brenner stepped onto the elevator, hand in hand with the little girl. A few weeks shy of five years old, she was already showing a greater promise than any of the other subjects in the program. He knew he had been right about her, getting ahold of her as an infant and raising her in an environment that would nurture her special gifts.

As they descended to the lower floors of the lab, the little girl looked up at Dr. Brenner, her big brown eyes sparkling and alert. "What game today Papa?"

"Oh, we are going to play a few games today." he replied, reaching down and patting her head. He continued, "Some of Papa's friends are here to watch you play today. I've told them all about the wonderful things you can do, and they want to see for themselves."

She had known, when Papa came to get her, that today must be a very special day. He always brought presents on special days. She looked down at the new clothes he had brought her; a red tank top and black track pants. He had even brought her new shoes for today, although she much preferred going about barefoot. She liked the feel of the cold tile beneath her feet and it was much quieter when she ran.

As they stepped off the elevator, he took her hand again and they walked down the bright corridor toward the big room where they played games. They stepped through the doors, and she looked around quickly to see how it was set up today. The large boxes - for climbing and hiding - were out, and also some targets arranged at the far end of the room. Today would be some of the fun games, she just knew it.

Dr. Brenner looked up the high wall at the large glass observation window where several men in crisp suits stood waiting. Over the last few years, the people funding his work had begun to question the fruitfulness of his endeavor. Some of them felt that it was a lost cause and the program should be abandoned entirely. In a last-ditch effort to sway their opinion and secure the future of his work, Dr. Brenner had reluctantly invited a few of them to his lab for a demonstration of the progress being made.

The men were startled at the sight of the small girl with her tight blond braids walking in with Brenner. They knew he was working with children in the program; he had explained that the talents they were looking for had to be nurtured and trained early before the mind was too closed off. But they hadn't really expected that the results he was describing could come from a girl so young.

"Are you ready to show them what you can do?" he asked the excited little girl. "How about we show them how well you can throw?"

"Yes Papa," she smiled back brightly.

He nodded to an assistant on the edge of the room, who wheeled out a table arranged with a number of small throwing knives. The little girl walked out to the middle of the room and stood a few feet back from the table, staring intently at the targets at the far end of the room, a good 150 feet away. With hands at her sides, and a look of concentration fixed on her tiny face, she began to lift six of the knives into the air. She froze them momentarily in a straight line before floating the blades silently into three pairs. After holding in place for another moment, the knives snapped to the far end of the room and each pair embedded themselves deep into the center of the three targets.

Dr. Brenner glanced up again at the window, reveling in the look of utter shock on the faces of the men assembled by the glass.

"Do you still doubt me?" he thought, the tiniest hint of a smirk curling the edge of his lip.

Stepping out into the center of the room, he patted the child on the head and said, "You did very well. Papa is very proud of you. Do you

think you can catch today, too?"

"Yes Papa!" she said.

He nodded once more to the waiting assistant who walked down to the targets and retrieved three of the knives. It took a minute of struggle to free them; the girl had embedded them extra deep today. Knives in hand, he turned back to face the girl, who had now taken up a position halfway between him and the table. He took a ready stance, deftly holding the first knife, hauled back and launched the blade toward her small frame.

Without the slightest flinch, she caught hold of the blade with her mind, curved it safely around her and arced it squarely into the center of the tabletop behind her.

The assistant smirked at how well she had handled the first knife. He had only started training her on blades a few weeks ago and she had picked it up immediately. Squaring up again, he decided to increase the difficulty and launched the other two blades in rapid succession. Again, the blades were no match and she grabbed both, hands remaining by her sides, slowed the first until the second caught up with it and again slammed them together into the table behind her. She turned to inspect her work and was pleased to see all three blades standing up perfectly straight, in a neat and uniform line across the center of the table.

"Well done," said Dr. Brenner, joining the girl once again in the center of the room. "Very well done."

This time, he didn't even dignify the men in the observation room with a glance. He knew all their doubts had been put to rest and this last demonstration would secure whatever funding he asked, for as long as he asked.

As the assistant took the targets out one of the side doors, and then came back to retrieve the table of knives, Brenner turned to the girl and asked, "How about a game of hide and seek?"

"Yes!" she beamed back. Hide and seek was one of her favorites. It had been a long time since any of Papa's helpers had been able to

catch her. "How many?" she asked.

"Today we are going to try three. How does that sound?"

"Are they friends?" she asked, then, after a pause, "or bad?"

Brenner thought about it for a moment. After glancing at the men in the observation room, and deciding the hassle would be worth rubbing his success in their smug faces, he said, "Bad men." He hadn't had a chance to warn his people, but they would figure it out soon enough.

The little girl's face brightened into a huge smile at that. When it was the bad men, she didn't have to hold back her powers. As Dr. Brenner stepped back over to the side of the room, she ran over to duck behind one of the large boxes. She knew Papa had given her the new shoes special for today, but she didn't want to chance having them squeak as she moved around the room, so she silently slipped them off.

Three men in dark green uniforms entered the far end of the room, each carrying a gun loaded with paint rounds. They knew the game well; the first man to hit the girl with paint got a nice bonus in his paycheck. Actually lay a hand on her and the bonus was triple. Of course, with reward comes risk. If they were playing as friends, there was a good chance they would leave the room bruised and bloody. If they were bad guys, well, the injuries could be a lot worse.

When everyone was in position, Dr. Brenner pulled a whistle from his pocket and blew it, signaling the start of the game. The men fanned out, anxious to roust the girl from her hiding spot. As they spread out to check the corners, the little girl silently climbed up and around one of the boxes and snuck back down and around the nearest man. Before he knew what was happening, she lifted him noiselessly into the air, ripped the gun from his hand and flung it into the far corner of the room, while hurling him against the wall. He landed in a crumpled heap of pain and knew he was done for the day; she had gotten the jump on him and he never heard a sound.

Hearing the commotion, the other two men began to converge on where they thought she must be. She once again darted into hiding

behind one of the larger boxes. She spotted the first man and floated up another box he had just passed. She flung it at him, knocking him to the ground and crushing him beneath its considerable weight. He groaned as he tried to free himself and knew it would take at least one more man to lift the box off when the game was done.

As this was happening, the last man had managed to sneak around behind her. He thought for once he had the drop on her and would earn that bonus. He weighed the decision. He could hit her with the paint round and be done, securing a well deserved bit of extra pay. But she was so close now. If he could get just a couple feet closer, he could lay a hand on her shoulder and the bonus would be huge, almost two months extra pay.

What he didn't know was that she had already sensed him there, sneaking behind her. In his moment of indecision, she struck. Without warning or even looking back, she ripped the gun from his hands while snapping both of his legs below the knees. He crumpled to the ground in a howl of pain.

Letting the gun drop to the ground, she skipped brightly back over to Dr. Brenner. "I won, Papa!" she beamed.

Patting the sides of her head with both hands, he leaned down and kissed the top of her head. "You did wonderful! Papa is so proud of you, Twelve. So proud."

Later that day, sitting alone on her bed and looking out the window at the forest beyond the lab, she quietly unwrapped the sucker Papa had given her. It was Cherry, her favorite. She was happy. She had done good and made Papa very proud. She loved Papa, and loved it when Papa was happy and proud of her.

2. A Quiet Life

A Quiet Life

Hawkins, IN

May 9, 1986

It was Friday night, and Hawkins Police Chief Jim Hopper was exactly where he wanted to be: at home, happily settled into his favorite recliner. With a cold beer in hand, it was time to relax and appreciate the end of another week. It had been a quiet one, just the way he liked it. That had been his entire reason for leaving the city and taking the position of a small-town Chief.

Thinking back, he couldn't believe how much his life had changed over the past few years. Three years ago, he had been living a mere shadow of an existence, spending his off-duty hours attempting to drown out his past with beer and painkillers and then dragging himself into the station the next morning to start again. All that had changed with the disappearance of a local boy, Will Byers, and the subsequent entanglement in the shady dealings of the local Department of Energy research lab. What had followed was a life-altering journey into a decaying parallel dimension, the rescuing of Will, and the discovery of a young girl who had been raised as an experiment in the lab since birth. After her escape from the clutches of the lab, he had taken her in and kept her hidden and safe for almost two years.

In that time, he had bonded with the girl, seeing in her a second chance with the daughter he had lost years before. In him, she came to know a father's love; something she had never experienced in all her 12 years of captivity. Now out of hiding, they were a family in every sense. With the help of a few well-placed friends, he had an official birth certificate, naming her Jane, the name given by her mother just before she was stolen, and listing Jim Hopper as her father.

Once it had been safe to come out of hiding, Hopper had moved them

back to his property by the lake. Thanks to some generous savings, and a sizable fund of government hush-money to keep his silence on all that had happened, he had his old trailer removed from the property and a new house brought in, big enough to give his Jane a proper place to call home at last. During their time in hiding, Hopper had carefully gathered proof of the things that had gone on at the secret lab in Hawkins and had stored it away in the care of a distant trusted friend. He then got word out to those that might still be seeking Jane, hoping to drag her back into captivity, that if anything happened to her, the information would be released and take down a number of people in high places. So far, no one had dared to call his bluff and life had settled nicely into a calm and normal routine.

As he looked around his living room it still felt strange to him, as though he were a guest in someone else's home, being surrounded by furniture and walls bright and clean. For so long he had gotten by with dark and discarded second hand furniture, and it had suited his gloomy outlook just fine. But he had to admit, it felt pretty nice having a home he was proud of and was everything his Jane deserved. Scanning the room his eyes fell on a pair of photos in matching gold frames on the fireplace mantle. The first was of Jane; a school picture from her Freshman year of high school which was currently drawing to a close. Next to that was a second grade photo of Sara, his first daughter, taken just months before cancer robbed her of her bouncy blonde hair. Hopper had been surprised when Jane had suggested adding it next to her own but she had eagerly insisted, knowing how much he loved and missed his first daughter and never feeling any jealousy at sharing her new father's affection.

Jane was a remarkable girl in so many ways. Being raised in a lab, she had never been taught much beyond rudimentary speech. As an experimental weapon, she had only ever been given what was absolutely necessary for her training. However, during her time in hiding, in their cabin out in the woods, she had quickly learned to read and began the long process of catching up on all she had missed from nine years of school. In addition to working her way through stacks of homeschool curriculum workbooks, she had made use of her powers to secretly attend a few classes at Hawkins Middle School. Thanks to a yearbook, class schedule and school floorpan that Hopper had brought home for her, she was able to reach out into the In-

Between, find the appropriate teachers and classrooms and secretly observe and learn as a silent member of the class.

All of that preparation had paid off and by last September, when it was safe to come out of hiding, she had been ready to start high school as a Freshman, right where she should be at her age. Now, as that first year was quickly approaching an end, it was nearly impossible to tell that she had missed out on so much early schooling. She was particularly strong in math, having a very logical and analytical mind. To Hopper's surprise, she had also developed quite an artistic knack, filling countless pages with sketches of landscapes and portraits of friends. In English, she was doing well enough, though it was easily the subject that gave her the most difficulties. She could read and write just fine, but the finer points of metaphors and phrasings were still a struggle. It was no surprise to anyone who knew her upbringing, but even there she was making steady progress all the time.

That had been one of their big fears at the start of the year, that her shortened and occasionally awkward phrasings might raise questions about the truth of her past. Those fears had been quickly laid to rest as she acclimated into school. Now, at the end of her first year, most people were just used to it and didn't even take much notice; it's just how Jane talks, they would say. Socially, she had made a few friends outside the core group that had taken her in, when she first escaped. She would hang out with them on occasion at one of their houses, or at a movie, but her best friends would always hold a special place with her. They were likely the only ones who would ever know her full story and understand her past.

Down the hall in her room, Hopper could overhear her having her nightly chat with Mike before bed. Despite having a phone of her own in her room, she still insisted on reaching out to him in the In-Between to talk each night. Hopper had to chuckle at that; at least she wasn't running up the phone bill like most teenage girls. He knew, of course, the real reason was so she could see him face to face while they talked. At least, she could see him. Having had her pull this long-distance chat thing on him a few times as well, Hopper knew that it was a very different experience for the recipient; a clear voice in your head and a warm presence on the skin if she reached

out and touched you. After initially trying to discourage her from using her powers, Hopper had decided that it was a losing battle and unfair to her. They were her special gift and who was he to try and suppress that? Instead, he now encouraged her to practice and strengthen, but only at her pace and in her own ways. That was an understanding her captors in the lab had never given her, instead always pushing her to reach further, strain harder, until that fateful day when she lost control of the power and ripped open a hole between dimensions. There were still times she blamed herself for everything that had happened as a result of that terrible day, but Hopper worked hard to help her see that all of the fault lay with the people at the lab who were trying to turn an innocent child into a weapon.

Jane let out a laugh at something Mike must have just said or done; a sound that still warmed Hopper's heart. When she had first escaped the lab, she didn't even understand what laughter or a joke was. Hell, she barely even knew how to smile. The thought still made his blood boil and he had to take comfort in the fact that the people responsible for her terrible upbringing were dead, victims of the beast that came through the hole they caused. Some of them had even been killed by Jane herself. That thought always brought a satisfied smile back to his face. Most fathers would have more than a few misgivings knowing that at the tender age of 12, their little girl had killed half a dozen highly trained soldiers using only her mind. Not Hopper; he understood she had done it not to prevent being recaptured, but entirely in the defense of her friends, particularly Mike.

Mike Wheeler; Hopper was torn over just what to think of him. His initial gut reaction was entirely fatherly and he badly wanted to hate the boy who insisted on dating his little girl. Try as he might, he just couldn't do it, though. Mike had been the one to rescue her and bring her in out of the rain the night she made her escape from the lab. He had kept her hidden from the agents of the lab seeking to take her back. He had stood his ground, facing down armed soldiers when they finally found her, ready to die to protect her. After she had dragged the beast back to another dimension in an effort to kill it once and for all, Mike had kept a stoic vigil, refusing to believe that she was really gone. Even once Hopper had found Jane in the woods

and gotten her safely to the cabin and into hiding, he had insisted that she not make contact with Mike. Night after night, she would go into the In-Between and sadly listen to his desperate pleas into the void, hoping beyond hope that she could hear him, and that she was somewhere safe. Many of those nights, Hopper had tuned his own radio to the off-band station Mike was using and listened in. Cynic though he was, even Hopper could hear to the determination in the boy's voice, refusing to give up on her. Some of those nights he even got a little choked up listening to Mike's desperation and questioned whether the boy should be brought into their nucleus of trust. In the end, though, he thought the risk was just too high.

After the assault on the lab and the closing of the gate, Hopper had been forced to relent on the silence and hiding from her closest friends; there was certainly no way to convince them she was somehow gone again. Even though it wasn't safe to bring Mike over to the cabin, he at least let them communicate. He had to admit that Mike had proven instrumental in getting her ready for school. There was plenty she could learn from books, but it was in her talks with Mike that she learned all she would need about how to actually fit in and navigate life in the outside world. He had spent hours tirelessly answering her every question, with total patience when a new concept took a while before she fully understood. It had been his suggestion to incorporate chunky bracelets and a wide-banded watch into her outfits to cover the "011" tattooed on her left wrist; in all his planning, Hopper had completely forgotten about that obvious giveaway that there was more to her past than anyone was letting on. When the time came for school, Mike had volunteered without hesitation, to take a lower math class than necessary and even Home Economics, so that he and Jane had identical schedules for her first semester. That way, he could spend the whole day by her side, helping to navigate this world that was entirely new to her, steer her away from potentially embarrassing situations and defuse things if someone started asking too many questions. Thankfully, as the daughter of the Chief of Police, nobody was very eager to cause her any trouble.

In some ways, Mike knew her even better than Hopper ever could. Being the same age, they just naturally connected more and there are some things a girl just couldn't talk as easily about with her dad.

Mike knew that under the strong, brave face she wore everyday, there was still a scared girl who lived with the fear of being dragged back to the lab. Hopper knew Mike would do anything, give up anything, to keep that from happening. Mike knew the experiences that could still trigger a panic attack and threaten to shut her down, and he was good at spotting them coming and help her to hold on and get through them. He knew all about her fear of any water deeper than the kitchen sink. He knew the mere thought of ice cream made her physically sick; and other than Hopper, Mike was the only one who knew why it utterly repulsed her.

Hopper knew that Mike was more than a friend; he truly, deeply loved his little girl. And even worse, she loved him too.

"How's a father supposed to deal with that?" he wondered.

He finished off his beer and decided it was probably about time for bed. Walking down the hall to her bedroom, he cracked the door a little and gave three short knocks, paused, and then gave three more. Even when she was deep in concentration, her mind out in the In-Between, she knew to listen for the knocks. It was their signal that it was time to come back to reality. After giving her a minute to wrap things up and say goodbye, he opened her door the rest of the way. As he stepped in, she pulled off her blindfold and grabbed a tissue to cleanup the blood under her nose. With all her practice and extended trips into the In-Between, she rarely got nosebleeds from her powers anymore. But when talking with Mike, they still happened; just further proof of the strength of their bond.

"Time for bed," he said as she tossed the tissue in the garbage and switched her radio off, silencing the static.

"It's not even a school night," she threw back, feigning a defiance they both knew was only for show.

"You know the rule, bedtime is bedtime. Besides, you're going to see him tomorrow afternoon."

At that, she brightened. She and Mike were going to hike to a meadow on the other side of the lake for an afternoon picnic tomorrow.

Hopper sat down on the edge of her bed and pulled her into a hug.
"Goodnight Jane," he said, planting a kiss on her forehead.

"Goodnight Daddy," she returned, planting a kiss on his cheek.

3. Dangers Old and New

Dangers Old and New

McChord Air Force Base

Tacoma, WA

May 9, 1986

Dr. Martin Brenner stood before his bathroom sink, getting ready for bed. At the end of another successful day, closing out a fruitful week, he traded his crisp black suit for a pair of neatly-pressed charcoal pajamas. He squeezed a precise dollop of toothpaste onto his brush and proceeded to polish his teeth, methodically working his way across his upper jaw and back across the lower. A creature of habit, his pattern was thorough and with little wasted motion. He pulled a length of floss from the roll and made another well-rehearsed tour through his mouth. Finally, a quick swish of mouthwash rounded out his nightly routine. Leaning in for a closer inspection, he assured himself all traces of the day had been removed from his mouth; in all things, there was no room for sloppiness.

Only then did he let his gaze slide up to take in the rest of his reflection in the mirror. Reaching up, he carefully lifted off the black patch covering the empty socket where his right eye should rest. Folding the band of the patch, he set it in its proper place on the little shelf above the sink. Turning his face slightly to the side, he carefully inspected the damage. He had been wounded badly when the beast from another dimension had pounced on him that terrible night. With its five mouth flaps, lined with thousands of teeth, the creature had badly shredded the right half of his face. He had lost both the eye and ear on that side. Even now, as healed as he would ever be, there were countless ragged scars across his cheek, neck and forehead. On the side of his scalp, there were several long, thin patches where hair simply refused to return.

As bad as the damage had been, his men had done their duty and saved him. Before the beast had a chance to do even more damage,

they had riddled it with enough gunfire to chase it off and dragged him back to safety. Most of those men never made it back out of the school, after returning inside to try and recover the girl, Eleven. He recalled that night with great irritation. They wouldn't have had to go to that school at all if the girl hadn't run off like that. His little girl, whom he had raised from a baby, had betrayed him, her loving Papa, and run away. Years of work had gone to waste and his most trusted associates were either killed or fled the project. Brenner himself had been forced into exile and found himself doing his best to continue his work in secret at a military base across the country, far from Hawkins. He had few friends left in power to fund his work, but enough strings had been pulled for his research to continue.

As for Eleven, all the official reports indicated that she died that night, using her powers to destroy the beast, but he knew better. He knew it would take more than that to kill her; she has to still be out there, somewhere.

His thoughts were cut short by six thuds in rapid succession from down the hall.

Smiling, he turned and spoke firmly over his shoulder "20:45, Twelve. Lights out in 15 minutes."

From down the hall came her reply, "Yes Papa."

Alone in her room, Twelve sat cross-legged on her bed, hands resting lightly on her knees. She was dressed in a dark gray tank top and matching track pants. On her nearby desk chair, a matching zippered jacket sat folded neatly; Papa always said there was no place in life for sloppiness. Beside her on the bed lay the discarded blindfold she used when she tried to reach out into the void to find people for Papa. She had never been able to make it work, but Papa thought that with practice she might still be able to do it. So she kept at it every night, for him. Try as she might, it only succeeded in giving her a headache.

"Besides, that was Eleven's trick," she thought to herself. She could never understand why anyone would want to slink around in the shadows trying to listen to people's secrets when you could just go up to them and MAKE them tell you.

Reaching out with her mind, one by one she pulled her six throwing knives from the target in the corner of the room and brought them over, laying them out gently in a neat row on the blanket in front of her. The light from her bedside lamp glinted off the mirror-polished blades with their gold inlaid handles. She had handled countless knives over the years, but these were special. They were hers, and only hers. She was allowed to keep them here in her room rather than having to turn them back into the armory at the end of training. They had been a present from Papa when they left Hawkins and moved out here; when she had to leave the only home she had ever known. She had been happy there, in her little room that looked out over the forest. Her little room, right next to Papa's. Because of HER. That horrible night, when Papa almost died, because of ELEVEN.

In a dark flash of rage, she whipped four of the knives up off the bed and slammed them into the target, forming a box, perfectly square, around the center of the board.

She fought back the fury that came over her whenever she thought back to that terrible night. She had been so scared when one of Papa's helpers had come to collect her. He had woken her up and told her to get dressed quickly and pack her things. She put her two changes of clothes into the bag the man had brought with him. She had grabbed the three things that mattered the most in the whole world to her. Her potted cactus with the little red flowers that she kept in the sunshine on her window sill. A framed picture of Papa that she kept on the table next to her bed, for the times when she missed him, when he had to leave the lab for a few days. The teddy bear he had given her when she was four, to show her how proud he was of her when she had killed the cat, just like he asked her to. She quickly put the bear and the photo into the bag along with her clothes, scooped up the cactus in her other hand, and followed the man out the door and down the elevator to a waiting car downstairs.

They had driven quickly through town and out to a nearby airport. On the way, the man driving had explained how Papa had been hurt, but that he was still alive. They had to get out of the area and get to someplace safe very quickly. When they got to the airport, they had parked next to a large, dark gray plane and climbed on board. She recognized it as a cargo plane from pictures Papa had shown her.

Inside, she had been shocked at the sight of Papa. He was laid out on a makeshift operating table, being tended to feverishly by a doctor and nurses. All she could really see of him was the blood that covered his face, before one of the crew forced her into a seat along the wall near the front and strapped her in. The plane had immediately begun taxiing toward the runway. With a deafening roar, the engines spooled up and they made their way down the runway and into the air. Everything had happened so fast, she hadn't even had a chance to be scared about this new experience of flying until they were airborne and headed west. Stopping to think about it, she had been terrified through the whole flight, sitting alone in that darkened space listening to the engines drone endlessly along. She had wanted to cry out every time the plane shook with turbulence, but she knew she had to be strong for Papa, so she kept quiet. Instead, she passed the night with her eyes clamped tightly shut, clinging to her cactus.

Once they had settled into their new housing on base, and Papa was feeling better, or as better as he was ever going to get, he had decided it was time to explain a few things he thought she should know. She had sat there in silence as Papa explained how her mother had gotten very sick near the end of her pregnancy and how she had asked Papa to please take care of her little girls. It had certainly been a surprise when Papa informed her she had an identical twin sister, named Eleven. He had even shown her pictures of Eleven from her time in the lab back in Hawkins. At first Twelve thought it must have been some kind of joke, or one of Papa's tests, until she took a close look at the other girl's wrist. Sure enough, where her own wrist read 012, this other girl's read 011. It gave her a strange feeling to think that there was some other girl out there, going around wearing her same face.

Papa continued with his explanation, how their Mama had died right after the girls were born, and so Papa had taken it upon himself to make sure they were raised to be good, strong, healthy girls. He decided soon after they were born that Twelve was the stronger girl, with the potential to do great things and make him so proud. So he had spent lots of extra time with her, to make sure she learned well. Eleven was sent to be raised in a different part of the lab. Papa didn't want to distract Twelve from her studies, so he had kept them apart. It all made perfect sense to Twelve. Papa was very smart, so if that is

what he had decided to do, it must have been right. And Papa had been right, of course. Eleven had been the one to betray Papa's trust and run away. She had been the one to let that monster loose, and almost got Papa killed when he tried to go and rescue her and bring her home.

Shaking off the thoughts of that night, Twelve once again plucked the four knives carefully from the board and brought them back to the bed. She lifted their sheath off the bed and then, one by one, lifted each blade into the air and slipped it delicately back into its proper slot. That done, she rolled the sheath up and secured the snap. Finally, she floated it back to its proper place, neatly on the shelf next to her cactus. She gave it a final nudge on one end, ensuring the bundle lay perfectly straight.

As she stood and pulled back the covers on her bed, Papa walked in to say goodnight. Settling in, she pulled the blankets up to her neck as Papa crossed the room and stood next to her.

"Good work today." he said, reaching out a hand and giving her head a quick pat.

"Thank you!" she smiled back, "Goodnight, Papa"

"Goodnight, Twelve" he returned, already turning to head for the door.

As his hand moved for the light switch, she reached out with her mind and clicked off the lights first, throwing Papa a grin. It was her little game she played with him every night when he came to tuck her in. He threw her back a quick smile as he walked out and pulled the door shut behind him.

Laying there in the darkness, staring into the black nothingness, she thought once more about her sister. Papa told her that everyone was sure Eleven had died fighting the monster, but she could tell he didn't believe it. And if Papa thought she was still out there, then she must be, because Papa is very smart. As her eyes started to close, she once more repeated her nightly vow.

"I know you're still out there Eleven. You were bad. You hurt Papa,

and I am going to make you pay for that. Someday."

4. A Sister's News

A Sister's News

Hawkins, IN

May 10, 1986

Eleven awoke with a smile on her face. She had been dreaming of her boyfriend Mike. She liked it when she dreamed of Mike because they were always happy dreams. Sometimes she had scary dreams where she was still stuck in the Upside-Down, or even worse, back at the lab. When she had those dreams, she would wake up suddenly and not be able to get back to sleep for a long time. Mike had told her those were called nightmares and they were normal. Daddy had explained that it was understandable that she had them so often, as she had been through a lot more scary things than most kids ever had to deal with. When they were really bad, and she woke up screaming, Daddy was always there to help her calm down and he would stay by her bed and rub her back until she fell asleep again. But today was a good day, because it had been a Mike dream.

As her eyes flickered open, she remembered that it was Saturday and bolted up in bed. Saturday meant two things. Saturday afternoon meant a picnic with Mike. And Saturday morning meant waffles!

Last Christmas, Mike had given her something called a waffle iron, along with a bag of powder called waffle mix. The picture on the bag looked a lot like Eggos, just bigger. Daddy had nearly fallen out of his chair laughing as she unwrapped her present, and told Mike that it was the perfect gift for her. Mike had laughed back, and she had started to feel hurt at this shared joke that, once again, she didn't understand. She came back around quickly as Mike recovered and set about explaining just what it was. He had explained to her how Eggos are actually just a frozen, pre-made version of what are called waffles. They are good for a quick breakfast; or lunch, dinner, dessert and snack, as Eleven liked to view them. But real waffles, made from mix and cooked up in a waffle iron, are like super-Eggos. At this, she had stopped opening presents and insisted on making a batch right

then. At that first fluffy bite, she was hooked. They were warm and sweet. They were amazing. They were almost better than a kiss from Mike - almost. She wanted to scream at them for keeping this delicious secret away from her despite how much they knew she loved Eggos.

Ever since then, she had insisted that even if they had Eggos sometimes during the week, on Saturday morning she got to make waffles in her waffle iron for breakfast. She looked over at the clock and was overjoyed to see it was already 7:30. Daddy didn't like it when she got up and started breakfast too early on the weekends, but she knew he would be up by now. Sure enough, as she padded down the hall and through the living room, there he was in his favorite chair with a mug of coffee and the newspaper; his coffee and contemplation, as he liked to call it.

"Morning Daddy," she said, wrapping an arm around his neck in a quick hug. "Ready for breakfast?"

"You bet. Want to do french toast today?" he responded with a grin.

"No! Waffles are Saturday," she smiled back as she headed off to the kitchen.

Twenty minutes later they were seated at the kitchen table with a stack of waffles, fried eggs, OJ for Eleven and a fresh mug of coffee Hopper.

Hopper had to admit, among her many gifts, his Jane made perfect waffles; lightly crisp and browned on the outside and tender, fluffy and sweet in the middle. As they ate, he explained that one of his officers had called in sick this morning, so he needed to head in to the station for a few hours. He would be back around 1:00 and would pick Mike up on the way so he didn't have to bike all the way over. At the mere mention of Mike, Eleven brightened into a huge smile.

He reached across the table and tousled her hair a little. "Do you realize your smile gets bigger every time I say that boy's name?" he teased.

"Does not," she returned, in mock defiance, though she knew he was

right.

"Oh yeah? Mike," he repeated. She couldn't help it, she smiled again. "Mike. Mike. Mike."

Soon they were choking back fits of giggles. Before she had come into his life, Hopper had forgotten how good it felt to laugh like this. As she cleared the table and started washing the dishes, Hopper headed off to his room to change into his uniform. Coming back into the kitchen, he poured himself one last cup of coffee, in a travel mug this time and gave Eleven a quick kiss on the forehead.

"See you in a few hours," he said. Then, after a pause and a quick grin, he continued, "Try not to get into trouble."

"See you then. Call if you're going to be late," she added.

Though they were pretty sure they were in the clear and no longer being tracked, they still took a few precautions to stay safe. One of those was keeping close track of when the other should be home. On the kitchen counter, right next to the phone, was Hopper's old radio base station. When he was going to be late, he was always certain to call either on the phone, or on the radio, to let her know. And likewise, when she was out with her friends, she would keep him up to date either with the phone, or more usually, with Mike's radio. It was a little thing, but it gave them both some much needed peace of mind knowing the other was safe.

After Hopper had left for the station and Eleven had finished up the dishes, she headed back to her room, trying to decide what to do with her morning. Changing out of her pajamas, she pulled on a t-shirt and sweatpants. Settling on her bed, she decided it was a good time to pay a visit to Kali. After she had come clean to Hopper about exactly what happened on her trip to see Mama, and then to Chicago where she found her sister, he had been understandably upset. However, in the aftermath, he had decided to leave it up to Eleven whether to reach out to her again or not. He never forbade her to make contact, knowing that Kali was probably one of the only people who could truly understand the things she had gone through, growing up in the lab, but he made it pretty clear he didn't want to know about it if she did. And so it was that she waited until quiet

days when she had the house to herself to check in on her wayward sister.

After turning her radio on to static, she laid back in bed and pulled the blindfold down over her eyes. Within moments, she had found Kali. Sure enough, she was gathered in the picture room with the rest of her crew, discussing where they would head next in their quest to find the bad men. Eleven had been surprised, after their hasty run from the police in Chicago, that Kali had planned ahead and had copies of all their research hidden in safe locations for just such an emergency. She still wasn't quite sure how she felt about Kali's mission to seek her revenge on the people from the lab; while she knew she didn't want to be a part of the hunt, she agreed that the bad men needed to be punished for what they had done.

Eleven stood in the corner for a minute, just watching and listening. Suddenly, Kali looked right at her. "Good Morning, Jane. Listening in again?"

The rest of the crew looked around the room quickly, but of course they couldn't see her, since it was only her presence in the In-Between. She knew that Kali seemed to sense her whenever she reached out and found her, but normally she didn't call attention to it and just continued on until she could get away for a few quiet minutes to chat. Today, it seemed, Kali had something on her mind and had been expecting her.

"Can we take five?" she addressed the group. "My sister and I need to chat."

The rest of the group got up from the table and began filing out of the room. Even though they couldn't see her, Kali had previously explained to them that Jane could see and hear them just fine. On the way out, they each addressed her.

"Nice to see you again Miss Jane," said Funshine.

"Don't take too long, Shirley," added Axel.

Once they were alone, Kali took a seat at the table and Eleven sat down across from her.

"So, what's up?" Kali began.

"Not much. I just wanted to check on you. Make sure you're still okay."

"Oh, you know us. Still fighting the good fight." she said with a half smile. "Do you see where we are?"

"No," Eleven replied quickly. "I've been practicing. Keeping my mind from pulling back to find where you are. Safer if I don't know."

"Smart," Kali returned. She paused for a long minute and Eleven could see the uncertainty creep onto her face.

"I'm glad you contacted me. There is something serious we need to talk about."

Eleven was understandably startled at the abrupt change in tone. "What is it?"

"It's about Dr. Brenner," she continued slowly.

"Papa?" Eleven was stunned, this was the last thing she expected Kali to bring up.

She went on. "First, I owe you an apology. The night you were here, after what happened with Ray, I put Brenner in your head to try and convince you to stay; to help in the fight. It was manipulative and unfair of me. I'm very sorry, Jane."

Eleven paused a beat before responding. "It's okay. I understand why you did."

A brief look of relief crossed over Kali's face but it faded again just as quickly as she continued. "We found another man; a man from the lab. He is also claiming that Brenner is still alive, still out there. And unlike Ray, he had details about what happened that night at the school. He described the creature just as you did. He claims that after the initial attack, they had been able to fight it off of Brenner. Then, while it was distracted somewhere else in the school, probably with you, they were able to drag him to safety and get him on a plane somewhere into hiding."

Eleven sat paralyzed by what she was hearing. It couldn't possibly be true, could it? Papa had died that night. Was this another trick by Kali? But why?

Kali went on, "He had details about the boys you were with. I know you told me all about Mike, but not about the other two. He says there was a dark-skinned boy with a bandana named Lucas, who refused to release the grip on his wrist-rocket for hours after the attack. And a boy named Dustin with curly hair and missing front teeth who swore a lot while the paramedics were trying to check him over. Are those the other two boys that were with you that night?"

Eleven felt like the world was collapsing in around her. This couldn't really be happening, could it? The edges of her vision were starting to darken and she could barely croak out a reply "Yes."

Kali went on with her plea, "Jane, I can't force you to do this, and I know this is a tremendous burden to ask of you." She paused. "But I would like to you reach out and see if you can find him. If he is still out there, we need to know. If he is out there, we need to stop him."

She waited a long time for a response, and when nothing came, she asked "Jane?"

Suddenly, with rising panic in her voice, Eleven croaked out, "I... I have to go."

With that, Kali felt the presence in her mind fade out, signaling that Jane had left. She didn't know what would happen now, but she knew telling her had been the right thing to do. It was in her hands now. If Brenner was out there, he was far too protected to be found through normal channels; only Jane could find him now, out there in the In-Between.

Alone in her room, Eleven sat bolt upright in bed and ripped the blindfold down from her eyes and let it hang loose around her neck. Her breath was coming shallow and fast as the panic settled deeper into her mind, fighting to process this news. Her pulse was racing ever faster as the first drops of blood fell from her nose, running freely from both nostrils. They fell unseen down the front of her shirt and onto her lap. She wanted to scream, to cry, something, anything,

but she was paralyzed by what she just heard.

"Papa can't still be out there," she told herself. "He died that night, in the school. I saw it with my own eyes." She hugged her knees up to her chest, fighting for breath. "The demogorgon jumped on him and started eating him. I saw it. As Dustin carried me down the hall, I saw it on top of him. He has to be dead. Mike saw it happen too. He told me so. Daddy said he's gone, and Daddy doesn't lie."

She was on the verge of breaking, her heart pounding faster than she thought it ever had in her life. Of everything she had faced, finding the demogorgon in the In-Between, fighting it in real-life, dragging it and herself into the Upside-Down, running, hiding, fighting; none of it compared to what she was feeling right now. "What if Papa is really still alive?"

Her breath was coming so shallow and quick she felt like she was choking. Suddenly Hopper's face came into her mind and she could hear his steady, calming voice. "Remember what I taught you, when you feel the panic coming on. Deep breath in. Hold it. Deep breath out. Slow." Her hand shot to her wrist and her fingers instinctively wound themselves around the blue band she wore there. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Focus on the band. Daddy's special band. Sara's band. She never got to know Daddy's first daughter, her sort-of-sister. But the band had been hers. Then it was Daddy's, to give him strength when he thought he couldn't hold on. Now it was her's. Deep breath in. Deep breath out. Daddy gave it to her, he trusted it with her, to know he was always there with her. To give her his strength and courage when she didn't have enough of her own; when she felt like falling apart. Deep breath in. Deep breath out.

Finally, reluctantly, her pulse started to slow. Her breath began to come easier again. The blood slowed to a stop under her nose. As she calmed, the tears finally came, falling hard and fast. Like a floodgate opening, she sobbed out everything she was feeling, her face buried in her hands. Somehow, despite telling herself otherwise for two years, she knew Kali was going to be right. She would look out into the In-Between, and there she would find Papa, alive and well. That night in Chicago, through her manipulative projection of Papa, Kali had been right; Eleven had not looked for Papa, terrified that she would actually find him. The thought left her sobbing even harder.

She wanted so desperately to be free of him, of her past, and now it was threatening to come crashing back around her.

After what seemed like an eternity, the tears mercifully began to slow and she started to come around and feel a little better again. Eventually, all cried out, she lifted her face from her hands to find they were a sodden mess of tears and blood. She knew her face must look about the same. Looking down, she saw just how much blood was all over her clothes and decided a shower and a new outfit were in order. Stopping by the laundry room, she started her clothes soaking to get the blood out. Thanks to her continued training, with their numerous accompanying nosebleeds, she had gotten good at laundering out blood in the last couple years. In the bathroom, she stepped under the hot spray and let the last of her tension melt away. Years of pent-up fear had been sobbed away and in their place a new determination took hold.

"If Papa is still out there, I will find him. I will deal with him," she thought. "But that is for another day. Today is Saturday, and Saturday means Mike." Despite it all, she couldn't help to smile at the mere thought of him.

5. She Trains

She Trains

Yakima Firing Center

Yakima, WA

May 20, 1986

Twelve stood alone in the desert, knee-high scrub all around her. It was the second day of her latest round of training, and it wasn't going well.

Papa had arranged a special set of tests away from the city with a simple mission. Try as she might, she just could not seem to get this scenario right and it was destroying her to disappoint Papa like this. She could hear the missile coming long before she could see it. As it crested the ridge before her, she reached out with her thoughts and grabbed hold of it; this part was easy enough. As the chemical thrusters fought against her grip, she carefully guided the projectile down to the ground in the designated spot. So far so good; she had managed this on only her second attempt yesterday. The hard part was still to come. As the propellant ran low, the thrust began to dissipate and her tension grew. "Here it comes," she thought. Reaching out, she visualized clamping giant hands around the warhead and forming a tight ball around its deadly charge. The moment of truth was almost at hand. Could she do it this time, she wondered? She braced for what was to come, as the warhead discharged in a roaring ball of destructive fire. She held on with all her strength.

The mission was simple enough. All she had to do was grab an armed warhead out of the air as it passed over head, guide it down to the ground and hold the detonation in containment. If there was a crater left behind, she failed. If the ground, or the brush, got scorched, she failed. If she did everything right, and managed to contain the blast, Papa would radio to the men at the far end of the range and have them prepare to launch a larger warhead.

It was hard work, draining every ounce of strength she could muster, but she also knew it was very important; Papa had said so. The Russians had bombs bigger than anything she could even imagine and someday she might be called on to take one of them down safely. So onward she trained, trying her very hardest to to contain the blasts Papa's men sent her way.

In the brief seconds the blast was raging, Twelve held on with all her strength. Maybe this would be it. Maybe this time she would be able to contain it. At the last moment, her grip faltered and a raging inferno issued forth where moments before it had been nothing more than a harmless ball of flame above the ground. Rocks and dirt ripped forth from the ground and flew out in every direction as the blast tore away at the landscape around it. Completely drained, she fell to her knees, blood pouring from her nose and ears.

After a brief moment of recovery, she chanced a look over her shoulder at the ridge behind her. Standing outside the command trailer, she could distinctly pick out Papa, watching the scene unfold. Even though he was almost a quarter of a mile away, she could see the look on his face and the way he was standing. She had failed him again. The disappointment carried across the distance like electricity and it drained her even further as she saw him turn to look out across the desert behind him. She was failing Papa. It hurt so badly to disappoint him. She could feel the tears welling behind her eyes and forced the feeling back down. Tears were not for right now; tears were for later when she was alone. Papa said tears were a weakness so she had not let him see them for many years now; they were for private time. As she often did these days, when she started to doubt her strength and all she was capable of, she thought of her sister, Eleven. She would remind herself there is no way that Eleven could do the things she was attempting. Papa had told her all about the things her sister could do. Sure, she could make little things happen like crushing a can or making a pen float, but never anything big. No, her sister was scared and weak. She spent her days hiding in her tank of water, sending her mind out into someplace Papa called The Void, and snuck around just listening to people and their whispered secrets. No, Eleven could never do the things that she did. Papa said so.

Standing outside the command trailer, Dr. Brenner stared in

disappointment at the scene before him. Once again, she had failed to contain the blast. They were nearing the end of the second day of testing, and she had yet to contain a blast stronger than a few sticks of dynamite.

"Hell, a reinforced concrete bunker could have contained that last one better than she did," he thought, shaking his head in disgust.

Hoping to hide his disappointment from her, he turned away to look out across the barren landscape that stretched away toward the horizon. As seemed to be happening more and more these days, his thoughts turned to his other little girl, Eleven.

"Could she have contained that blast?" he found himself asking for the third time today. He was pretty sure she could have, and that made Twelve's continual failure even more painful.

In their early years, Twelve had been so much more powerful than her sister, and Brenner had fallen into the false belief that the disparity would continue. She had been fiercely loyal, never questioning his every request and eager to please her Papa. For his part, he had fed into that desire, showering her with constant praise, and that had fueled her progress for years. Now, though, she seemed to have struck a plateau that no amount praise could help her to rise above.

Eleven, on the other hand, had been a quiet and subdued girl growing up. Her strengths had taken him much longer to recognize due to their subtle nature. But remarkably, she had later shown growing abilities in more than one branch of psychokinesis; a feat Twelve had never been able to match. The real problem had been Eleven's gentle nature. It took a tremendous provocation to unleash her full potential. She had outright refused to kill an innocent cat, a defiance Twelve never even considered in her eagerness to please her Papa. Only minutes later, though, when faced with the prospect of confinement in the dark room, she had faced no difficulty in bodily hurling one man into the wall and snapping another's neck. In a moment of utter terror, she had managed to rip a hole in the very fabric of reality. Worst of all, when it came to protecting those she truly cared about, a group that did not include her Papa anymore, she had taken out multiple, highly-trained assailants in a single,

painful blow.

He knew deep down that if one of her friends were out there in the desert, threatened by the blast of an incoming missile, Eleven would face no difficulty both containing the blast and for added effect, directing the full force of the explosion back at the launch site.

"Hell, stick that Wheeler boy out there and she could probably hold in a Hiroshima blast," he thought, bringing a rare laugh to his lips as he turned back to observe Twelve as she prepared for the next volley to be sent her way.

From her vantage point on the range, Twelve hazarded another glance up at Papa and was delighted to see he was smiling again. She knew everything was going to be okay. He knew she would get the hang of this latest exercise. Papa was still proud of her.

6. A Discovery is Made

A Discovery is Made

Hawkins, IN

May 29, 1986

It was late on a hot Thursday afternoon and Eleven was restless. The heatwave had been hanging around for almost a week and she was getting tired of it. All the windows in the house were open, and several fans were doing their best to push the sticky air around. Hopper had warned her that morning that he would be late tonight, but he promised he would bring home her favorite pizza, pepperoni and black olive, so she had that to look forward to.

Lying back on her bed in the direct path of the box fan in her window, her thoughts drifted back to her little room deep within the lab. Despite all the horrors of growing up there, at that moment she found herself missing the fact that it was perfectly climate controlled; never too hot nor too cold, never sticky and humid. No matter the time of year or the weather fronts outside - for as much as she was even aware of there being a world outside - the air in her little room was always pleasantly consistent.

She quickly buried that thought; she would much rather endure periods of hot and miserable than be back in that awful place. Against her better judgement, she allowed her thoughts to drift toward the subject she had been purposefully avoiding for weeks now: Papa. She would have to face it eventually, but so far she had found a handful of flimsy excuses as to why it wasn't the right time to go searching yet. Tonight, though, she seemed to have run out of any further reasons.

It was still a few hours before Daddy would be home. "Plenty of time to take a quick look," she told herself.

So far, she had not told either Hopper or Mike about her visit with Kali or what she intended to go looking for. She didn't want to worry

them unnecessarily on the strong chance that she didn't find anything at all. She also didn't want them to try and talk her out of looking. She had known even before Kali's latest revelation that she would have to look someday, for her own peace of mind.

Turning the radio on to static and pulling the blindfold down over her eyes, Eleven settled back and tried to call up a distinct image of Papa. Despite the nearly three years that had passed since she had last seen him in person, his face blazed bright and clear in her mind. It was the face she had seen almost every day as far back as she could remember, until she made her escape. Sometimes it was the only face she would see for weeks at a time.

She reached her mind out into the In-Between and started trying to locate him. At first, she found only blackness stretching away in every direction. Pushing harder, she sent her mind further out into the world, trying to flush him out from wherever he might be hiding. Still, there was no sign of Papa. With a sense of relief, she let go the breath she hadn't even realized she was holding. Suddenly, in the distance, a light flickered into view and forms began to take shape.

Her first instinct was to turn and flee; to rip the blindfold from her eyes and yank herself free of this place that had brought so much pain to her life. Instead, knowing that she had to determine for sure that what she was seeing was true, she started to walk toward the light. With each nervous step, the image became clearer until she was standing right beside the man, seated at a table eating dinner.

"Papa," she whispered, unbelieving, into the darkness, barely audible. He could not hear her, of course; she had to deliberately send her words for them to be perceived, but somehow she still feared he would perceive her standing at his side.

She stepped around to face him, to see him more clearly. Looking up from his plate for a moment, she caught his face square on and her blood ran cold. It really was his face staring back at her. That face had haunted her dreams for as long as she could remember. The first face she ever knew. Papa was alive.

She could feel the panic setting in again, her breath coming rapid and shallow. Her hand dove instinctively to her wrist once more and

found the band.

"No," she told herself. "No, you can't fall apart now."

Gritting her teeth, Eleven looked back at her Papa, taking in his features, his surroundings. She knew she had a job to do: figure out where exactly he was. With almost painful effort, she began to draw back and take in the scene. Papa was seated at a plain wood kitchen table, much like the table at the Byers'. Before him, a plate of what looked to be chicken and steamed broccoli. Next to the plate was a stack of file folders, like the ones Daddy brought home from the station when he had to catch up on paperwork. The top folder was open and he was slowly flipping through the pages as he absently poked at the food on his plate.

Looking closer at his face, she noticed for the first time the ragged scars across one cheek. His eye was covered with a patch like the man from one of those movies Mike showed her. A pirate, that was it, she thought. That further confirmed what Kali had said about him being rescued from the attack.

"More chicken, Papa?" came a voice from behind her.

Eleven whirled around, suddenly taking in the other diner sitting with Papa. Her blood ran cold as she found herself staring back at her own face. She turned back to Papa again, not comprehending what she was seeing.

"Is this a memory?" she wondered. "That can't be, though. I never ate with Papa. I only ever ate in my room, off the little metal trays."

She turned once more to the girl with her face. She realized this girl was too old to be her, back when she was still in the lab. She looked the same as she does now. Her hair was wrong, too; much longer than Eleven's ever was in the lab, but also shorter than she wore it now.

Standing between them, she spun, first taking in one, then looking back at the other. Each turn brought her heart racing faster as question upon question piled up with no answers in sight. It was Papa, now, with scars she had never seen before. Who is this girl with

her face? Finally she stepped closer to the mysterious girl and it was like staring into a mirror. It was her own face down to the tiniest details, but how?

Suddenly, the girl turned her arm to scratch at the inside of her wrist, and there it was. Emblazoned on the skin in blocky numerals, 012. Dizziness overtook her as she ripped the blindfold from her eyes and pulled herself back to reality. Her hand shot once more to her wrist, twisting the band back and forth in her fingers, willing her pulse to slow, but the questions swirling through her mind held her right on the verge of panic. A wave of nausea threatened to return the Eggo she had enjoyed earlier that afternoon.

She needed to talk to someone - immediately - but who? Daddy would say it was just her mind playing tricks, Dr. Brenner is dead. What about the girl wearing her face? She could find Kali, but she would only demand to know where to find Papa.

"Papa is still alive, and he has another me," she thought. "How?"

She knew there was only one person she could talk to in this moment. Fighting back the gray creeping into the edges of her vision, she pulled the blindfold back on and pushed her mind out into the In-Between once more. The moment her eyes snapped open in the darkness she screamed his name.

"MIKE!"

7. News is Shared

News is Shared

Hawkins, IN

May 29, 1986

Across town, Mike Wheeler sat at the dinner table, uninterested in his plate of meatloaf and even less so the boring story his Dad was telling from his day at work. He had just brought a glass of milk to his lips when her voice ripped through his mind.

"MIKE!"

He sputtered milk all over his plate and nearly dropped the glass as his mind rang with her anguished cry. He immediately felt her presence, standing very close, in the room with him. His parents just stared at him, as though he had suddenly grown an extra pair of arms. Nancy, on the other hand, could tell immediately from the look on his face what was going on; El was in his head and it was something urgent.

"You just remembered you're supposed to be at Dustin's working on your science project, didn't you?" she lied, inventing an excuse for her brother to leave the table in a hurry. "I told you guys you shouldn't put it off until the last minute."

Picking up on the save she had expertly manufactured, Mike threw a thankful glance at Nancy before confirming her lie.

"Yeah, I forgot I told him I would be over at 5:30 to work on it," Mike said, expanding on her fabrication. "I've gotta go."

Without waiting for an objection from his mother, he grabbed his plate and carried it into the kitchen. Shouldering his backpack, Mike headed out the back door and grabbed his bike. Walking it up the trail behind his house, Eleven started in.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean to make you jump, but I had to talk to

someone."

"It's okay, El," Mike comforted. "What happened?"

As he climbed on his bike and began to peddle, Mike was suddenly aware of the warmth of her arms around his waist as her presence climbed onto the bike for the ride. It was not the first time she had done this, though she was perfectly capable of floating alongside as he rode. He didn't mind the closeness at all, reveling in the connection. Tonight, he could practically feel the pain and confusion coursing through her across the distance that separated them; a distance he was closing just as fast as his legs would carry him.

After a long pause, she finally began, "Papa is alive."

"What? How?" Mike replied, shocked. His mind immediately shot back to that night in the school, when he watched with his own eyes as Brenner was tackled to the ground by the demogorgon. "Go back, start at the beginning."

Taking a deep, steadying breath, she began by recounting her conversation with Kali several weeks ago. How, after putting it off, she had finally gone looking tonight. How she had found Papa, quietly eating dinner as though he hadn't been dead for almost three years.

After another long pause, she continued "I was there too."

"What do you mean?" Mike asked, confused. "Like, standing there watching him?"

"I was there eating dinner," she continued. "Well, it was me, but not me. She had my face. She looked just like me. But her wrist said 012."

She paused and then, in bewildered turmoil she asked "Mike, how does he have another me?"

Mike was stunned at what he was hearing. "How can that bastard Brenner be alive?" he wondered, teeth gritted against the anger that she was having to go through all this after trying so hard to put her past to rest. "And who is this girl with Eleven's face?" He could tell that question was somehow tearing her up even worse than Brenner

being alive.

The answer came to him in a flash. "Twins," he blurted.

"Twins?" she responded. "What is twins?"

In that moment, Mike was thankful that Joyce Byers had already had the Birds and Bees talk with Eleven, so she understood the basics of where babies came from and he could skip past that bit. He explained how, sometimes, a mom can have two babies at the same time. Most of the time, they looked different, and could even be both one boy and one girl. Other times, though, the babies can be from a single split embryo and are identical. Sometimes, it is possible to miss that there are two babies during tests until they day they are born.

"Brenner probably hid that in her test results, even if he did know," Mike thought, but kept it to himself.

"But Mama only had me," Eleven said. "She showed me in her dream circle."

"Think back hard, how much of the delivery did she see that she showed you?"

Eleven thought back hard to everything Mama had shown her and realized she had blacked out right away, and awoken much later in her hospital room, with the sunflowers.

"Not much of it," she conceded.

"That has to be it. If you were born with an identical twin, that doesn't seem like something Dr. Brenner would have told you about. It would have been just another science experiment to him; twins that he could raise in different environments to see how your powers developed differently."

All the while, Mike had been peddling with all his might, trying to reach her. As he swung off the road and down her driveway, he felt Eleven's presence leave his mind. Pulling to a stop and dropping his bike by the front steps, he looked up to see her swing open the front door and rush to him. Only now, in the safety of his embrace did she allow the tears to fall.

"Papa is alive," she sobbed. "And he has another me."

They stood there for a long time, her sobbing into his chest, him holding her tight, stroking her hair and knowing there were no words for a moment like this. Finally she pulled back and looked up into his eyes.

"Let's go inside," he started. "You're not going to like it, but we have to tell Hopper. I know it won't be easy, but we can't keep this a secret; he'll know what to do."

Slowly she nodded, casting her eyes back to the ground as she sniffled, "Yes."

An hour later, Hopper turned off the main road and drove his Blazer down the gravel driveway, pulling to a stop in his usual spot by the front steps. It had been a long day, but a quiet one. All he wanted was a couple slices of pizza and a cold beer. Grabbing the hot pizza off the passenger seat, he thought about how great the truck would smell for the next week. Only as he turned to climb the front steps did he notice Mike's bike laying on its side, abandoned in the grass. He immediately shifted into furious-father mode. Of all the rules that had been established and tweaked over the last two years, the firmest rule had been that no boys - especially Mike Wheeler - were to be over at the house when he wasn't there. Marching through the door and into the kitchen, he dropped the pizza on the counter and stormed off to find them, bracing himself to catch them in some act fathers should never find their daughters in.

Rounding the corner into the living room, he pulled up short as he spotted the two of them on the couch. Mike was sitting there, staring worriedly off into space. He was gently stroking her hair as she lay with her head on his chest, dozing slightly. She had clearly been crying, quite a lot. The blindfold still hung abandoned around her neck and her face and shirt were caked with drying blood. He knew whatever had happened, it was bad. For a moment, he almost wished he could have caught them making out on the couch; that, at least, he was prepared to deal with. All the anger ebbed away and was immediately replaced with a flood of concern for his little girl, clearly in anguish.

Rousing from his daze, Mike spotted Hopper and made a move to wake Eleven. Hopper quickly held up a finger, indicating for him to wait a minute. He turned and headed back into the kitchen, forming a plan as he walked. While he was still trying to figure out the finer points of dealing with a teenage daughter, particularly one with her difficult past, he had learned a few tricks that tended to help. He popped two Eggos into the toaster and a mug of water into the microwave to start heating. He began running hot water in the sink for a washcloth. He dropped the Eggos onto a plate, stirred some instant cocoa powder into the mug and assembled everything on a tray, which he carried back into the living room and set on the coffee table in front of the couch. Only then did he give Mike a nod to go ahead and wake her up as he settled into the chair across from them.

Eleven woke with a start as Mike gently shook her shoulder. She looked back and forth in a quick panic between Mike and Hopper, who both stared back in sympathetic concern. Only then did the entire night come flooding back to her. She buried her face once more in Mike's chest as another wave of tears wracked through her. This new round subsided quickly, and Mike began soothingly wiping the blood from her face. That done, she reached for an Eggo and tried taking a tentative nibble. At that moment, the flakey treat that normally brought her so much joy went down like a blob of thick paste.

Hopper sat there, silently taking in everything happening before him. "Too upset even for Eggos, this is going to be bad," he thought as he watched Mike continue to hold her and clean the blood from her face, working to comfort her. Again, try as he might, Hopper just couldn't hate the kid.

Finally, after what felt like an eternity, she tried a few tentative sips of the cocoa and began to revive a little more.

"So?" Hopper asked gently, attempting to get the ball rolling.

Eleven looked first at her father and then back at Mike with pleading eyes. "I can't. Will..?" she trailed off.

Mike nodded, "Sure." He turned to face Hopper as Eleven nestled deeper into his side, still holding the uneaten Eggo more for comfort

than anything else.

Mike took a deep breath and began, "Jane went looking for someone, in the In-Between." Even though it felt weird, he always referred to her as Jane when talking to Hopper. It just felt like the respectable thing to do, calling his daughter by her proper name. Over the next twenty minutes, Mike recounted everything she had told him earlier, trying his best to hold back his own thoughts on the situation. At the mention of Kali and the fact that she was the instigator that had sent her off on this hunt, Mike could tell that Hopper was visibly angered. He described how Eleven had found Dr. Brenner casually sitting down to dinner and his scarred appearance after surviving the demogorgon attack. Most disturbing of all, he went on to describe the girl she had seen there with him, a perfect copy in every detail, except for the 012 tattooed on her wrist.

Mike ended by describing his theory of identical twins and Hopper had to admit that it sounded more than plausible. "You're pretty bright, kid," Hopper complimented. Not sure how else to respond, Mike returned a sheepish half-smile.

Somewhere during Mike's description of the night's events, Eleven had fallen into a deep sleep, exhausted by the mental turmoil of the evening. Standing up from his chair, Hopper walked over and scooped her into his arms, carrying her back toward her bedroom. Turning back to where Mike sat on the couch he said, "Stick around, we need to talk," before continuing down the hallway.

While Hopper tucked Eleven into bed, Mike sat there running over in his mind all the things Hopper could want to talk to him about. He knew he had broken one of the cardinal rules of the house by coming here while Hopper was out. At the same time, it had been an extreme circumstance and there were countless things that seemed much more important at the moment.

As he walked back through the living room, Hopper motioned for Mike to follow him into the kitchen where they were less likely to wake her, though in her current state she would probably be out for the rest of the night.

Trying to get in front of the reprimand he was sure was coming, Mike

began "I know one of the main rules is that I'm not supposed to be over here when you're not home. I'm really sorry, but she was so upset and scared when she reached out to me that I knew I couldn't just leave her over here alone."

Hopper almost laughed at the apology. Maybe he was doing this whole father thing even better than he thought, if after everything tonight, the boy thought he was in trouble. "It's okay, kid. I'm not mad at you," he said with a reassuring smile. "This was obviously an extreme circumstance, and there was no chance of the things happening that the rule is supposed to prevent." Taking a pause, he continued, "Actually, I want to thank you. I don't know what would have happened tonight if you hadn't been there for her."

Mike was taken aback. Not only was he not in trouble for coming over, he was actually being thanked for doing so.

Hopper continued, "Would your parents notice if you didn't come home tonight?"

Grateful once more for Nancy's quick thinking at dinner, Mike replied, "No. They think I am at Dustin's working on a project for school."

"Good. Would you mind crashing on the couch here, tonight?" he asked. "I know after all this, if she wakes up during the night, she is going to want to talk to you more. And right now, I don't really want her trying to find you out there," he said, giving his hand a sweeping wave around them, "wherever her mind goes to find you."

"Yeah, of course," Mike nodded. Of course he would stay; to be there if she needed him.

"One more thing," Hopper went on. "We both know she is going to want to go back and find him again, both of them I guess. In the end, there's not a thing you or I can do to stop her. But I need your help in trying to talk her out of it as long as possible. I can't see anything good coming from her trying to track down that son of a bitch."

"Yes," Mike nodded again, knowing full well he would try to talk her out of it, and that she would look for Brenner anyway.

"Okay. Thanks. Did you have dinner? Want any pizza before I throw this in the fridge?" he asked.

"No thanks," he said, shaking his head. "Not really hungry, considering."

"Yeah, me neither," Hopper replied, picking up the untouched pizza and sliding the box into fridge. Grabbing a beer from the top shelf, he turned back and continued, "There's a quilt and a spare pillow in the hall closet, help yourself. I've got to make a phone call and see just what I can find out about this new girl, if she exists."

With that, he turned and walked into his room, shutting the door behind him. Mike looked around at the silent, empty kitchen and decided Hopper probably wouldn't be coming back out tonight. He flicked off the lights and headed to the hall closet to get the bedding and fixed up the couch for the night. After turning out all but a single light, so he could navigate the unfamiliar space if he had to get up in the night, he laid down and tried to process the evening's revelations. Exhausted though he was, his mind was a whirl of confusion. How could there be a second Eleven out there, still in Brenner's clutches? He knew that Kali had very different powers from Eleven, so what kind of powers does this new girl have? His heart was breaking for the turmoil he knew Eleven was going through, trying to come to terms with the possibility of a twin sister and the awful truth that Brenner was still alive. He wanted so badly to go to her, to wrap her in his arms and let her know he was there for her. He also knew that if Hopper found them together right now, this new-found peace would come to a crashing end. Hopper was taking an enormous risk allowing Mike this deeply into the workings of their new family, and he didn't want to do anything to risk getting shut out once again.

Eventually, exhaustion overtook him and Mike fell into a deep but fitful sleep. Down the hall, Eleven passed the night in her own deep, and mercifully dreamless, sleep.

8. More Information

More Information

Hawkins, IN

May 30, 1986

All too soon, dawn broke once more over Hawkins. Eleven half-opened her eyes and soaked in the warm morning rays of sunshine streaming through her window. For a few blissful moments, all felt right with the world. Sadly, the comforting fog of morning amnesia never lasts as long as it should. As she sat up in bed, she noticed immediately that she was still wearing yesterday's clothes, now stiff and gritty with sweat; the front of her shirt still crusted with dried blood, now beginning to flake away. With a resigned sigh, she allowed the memories of last night the freedom to bubble back into her consciousness. She knew there was a lot to sort out in regards to Papa and this new girl, in time, but for now she erected a barrier around those thoughts and kept them off to the side. Instead, she decided to focus on things that made her happy; things like Mike. He had been there for her in a way no one else could, as he always seemed to be.

Deciding she felt grimy from sleeping in her clothes, Eleven reasoned a shower would be the best way to start the day. Peeling off yesterday's clothes and pulling on her bathrobe, she left her room and headed to the bathroom. As she reached for the doorknob, she jumped back in alarm as it suddenly turned on its own. She gave a small scream of panic and fell into the wall behind her as the door swung open.

"Mike?" she asked in disbelief.

"El, are you alright?" he asked, crouching down in front of her. "I'm so sorry, I didn't mean to scare you."

As the wave of relief washed over her, she rocked forward on her knees and threw her arms around him.

"It's okay," he soothed, patting her back and pulling her tighter into his embrace.

Drawn by her cry of alarm, Hopper came pounding down the hallway. "Are you alright?" he hollered ahead, holding back his own panic. "What's wrong?"

He pulled up short as he spotted the two of them kneeling together, their arms around one another. They looked up and separated, guiltily.

"Sorry," Mike said. "I was coming out of the bathroom and startled her. She didn't know I stayed over."

Hopper turned with an exasperated sigh and walked back toward his own room to continue getting dressed. Mike and Eleven turned back to one another and shared a small laugh at how ridiculous they must have looked just then.

Taking her hands in his own, Mike asked the question that had been burning in his mind since he awoke, "Are you actually okay? How are you feeling?"

She gave a half-shrug in response. "Okay, I guess. Confused. A little scared."

"I understand," he consoled, "that was a lot to discover in just a few minutes last night. You know I'm here for you, right? Whatever you need, I'll be right here."

Pulling him into another hug, she whispered, "Thank you." Standing once more, she planted a quick kiss on his soft lips before turning to go into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Twenty minutes and a hot shower later, Eleven was feeling much more like herself again. She walked into the kitchen and found Hopper hard at work at the stove, whipping up scrambled eggs while Mike worked a line of bread slices through the toaster. On a morning like this, she would have preferred Eggos, but having not eaten since lunch yesterday, she wasn't about to be picky.

"Hey!" Mike said, smiling as he looked up to see her walk in. "I

thought you might be on your way out. Here you go."

He picked up a plate off the counter and passed it over to her. She broke out into a wide grin. Centered on the plate were two Eggos, freshly toasted, with smiley faces drawn in whipped cream. Before taking the plate, she threw her arms around him and planted a quick kiss on his cheek. At the stove, Hopper focused intently on the eggs, doing his best to ignore what his fatherly instincts told him was going on behind his back.

"Thank you," she said, taking the plate and settling down at the table. After finishing up plating the toast and eggs, Hopper and Mike walked over and joined her. They attacked their plates eagerly, having all skipped out on dinner the night before. As they poked at the last remains, Hopper got down to business.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen and I don't want any objections. I have to go into the station today since we are still a man short. Jane, you're staying home from school today. I've already called and told them you don't feel well."

"No objections," she replied with a half grin. "I just want to go back to bed anyway."

"Mike, you ARE going to school. I can give you a lift into town so you don't have to bike the whole way."

Mike of course wanted to object to that. He didn't think it was wise to just be leaving her alone all day after last night. He also knew an objection would get him cut out of this newfound inclusion, so he bit his lip and kept quiet.

"Dr. Owens is going to be coming by, hopefully before we have to leave. He is bringing some boxes of paperwork. Jane, you are to leave those alone today. I know you're going to want to snoop."

He paused and eyed them both for a second, still unsure of the offer he was about to extend. Finally, he decided it was the right move.

"If you guys can both agree to keep all of this under wraps," he turned his glare to Mike at this, "even from your friends, I will pick

Mike back up tonight and bring him here for dinner, and to go through the boxes all together."

He let them mull the idea over for a minute, although the pleased look they shot each other told him all he needed to know; they would keep quiet for now. Finally, he turned his gaze at Eleven.

"Jane. I know I promised that I would never force you to not use your power, as long as you were being safe. So I'm not telling, I'm asking. Nicely." He softened his voice, pouring all his concern into the plea, "Until we know what is going on, please, don't go looking for Brenner or this other girl."

She was startled at the tenderness in his voice, though not surprised at the request itself. She looked to Mike and saw the same look of concern. He gave her a half smile and nodded his head, signaling he was in agreement with Hopper. She looked from one to the other, before nodding her head as well. "Yes."

"Okay, good. Thank you," he replied, throwing her a grateful smile. He wasn't sure she would be able to resist the temptation, but at least she would try.

The silence that followed was broken by the sound of tires coming down the gravel driveway. Dr. Sam Owens pulled his dark green sedan to a stop next to Hopper's Blazer and climbed out. The trio inside abandoned the breakfast table and rushed out to the porch to see just what he had brought. Dr. Owens walked around to the trunk, leaning on a cane and favoring his good leg. He opened the trunk, pulled out a large file box and tucked it under his arm, before looking up to spot the audience that had gathered.

"Good morning," he shouted up to them with a smile. "Mike, want to give me a hand with the other one?"

Mike was a little surprised Owens could remember his name, with all that had happened in their brief day together in the lab. Though perhaps a near death experience like that solidifies those kinds of details in the mind.

"Sure," he replied, as he started down the steps. He joined Owens at

the rear of the car and pulled out the second box, surprised by the weight of all the papers inside. Though he knew Hopper didn't want them snooping before tonight, Mike couldn't help glancing at the printed label affixed to the end of his box:

D.O.E. Hawkins

Project Wildfire

Box 2 of 2

He had already guessed the mystery boxes must be related to the lab, though his curiosity only grew now that it was confirmed.

"Thanks," Owens said, slamming the trunk lid and starting toward the porch. Mike snapped back to reality and followed behind. Hopper started down from the porch to relieve Owens of the first box. Eleven followed close behind, curious herself at these boxes. She couldn't help but remember finding another box like these, under the floor of the cabin in the woods. That time, the contents had led her first to Mama and Aunt Becky, and then on to Kali. She had been furious at Hopper for keeping so much a secret from her. They had later talked it over, among many other things, and she understood why he had done it. It didn't make the betrayal sting any less, but she understood. It had been one of their "make or break moments" as Hopper liked to call them. So far, they had made it.

Hopper turned and handed his box to her and said, "You guys take those into the kitchen and leave them on the counter. Dishes in the sink. Jane, you don't have to wash them today, I'll take care of it tonight. Mike, be ready in five minutes. If you're not at the Blazer ready to go, I'm dragging you out by your feet and your biking to school. Clear?"

They both grinned and nodded and ran inside with the boxes.

He turned to face Owens then. "Thanks from bringing them over so quick, Doc."

"Please. Like I told you last night, I don't want these boxes any more than you do. When they shut down the lab, I only saved them from

the shredders because I had a feeling they would be important someday. I had hoped I was wrong, of course." He paused and then went on, "So how is she taking it?"

"Better than I would...than I am. As always."

"She's a remarkable girl, I'll give you that," complimented Owens.

Hopper waited a moment, afraid to ask the question burning in the front of his mind. Afraid both of knowing the answer and not knowing. "Did you look at the files?"

The smile slowly faded from his face, revealing the ravages that years of stress had left behind. "Yeah. It's not pretty, but it's all there. And yes, she is."

Hopper just nodded. "Great. Thanks again for hanging onto them and bringing them out so early. Need any coffee for the road before you go?"

"Nah, that's alright. I was going to grab some breakfast on my way through town. I hear that diner on Randolph finally reopened."

That gave Hopper a quick twinge in his gut; Benny's old place. He had heard it had reopened, but hadn't been able to face the thought of actually trying it after everything that had happened.

"Alright, well, thanks again," he said, extending his arm to shake Dr. Owens hand. "Drive safe."

"Thanks," he said as he started back toward his car. Pausing at the door, he looked back and added, "Call if you need anything else. Really, anything at all, call me."

Hopper nodded once more as Owens slid behind the wheel. He fired up the engine and started back up the driveway. Despite his initial distrust of the Dr., stemming mainly from the fact that he was occupying Brenner's old post, Hopper had to admit he was probably their strongest ally in giving Jane a normal life. He checked his watch and realized they needed to be heading out if he was going to get Mike to school on time. He reached down and grabbed the frame of Mike's bike and walked it over to the Blazer, tossing it into the back

before starting toward the house to drag out its owner.

As he reached the front door, Mike and Eleven emerged once more. Mike had his backpack slung over one shoulder and was whispering his goodbye.

"Get some rest and I'll see you tonight. If you need me, call me. I love you." He leaned in and planted a quick, soft kiss on her lips. Then, taking her hands in his, he continued, "Be safe."

She knew exactly what he meant by that; don't go looking. She also knew she had no intention of looking for anything but her softest pajamas and a pillow. She gave his hands a squeeze, "I will. I love you too."

She threw a disapproving glare at Hopper as he groaned in response to their mushy display. "Get in the car," he said to Mike, playfully dragging him backward by the shoulder.

He stepped into Mike's place and wrapped her in a hug. "Seriously, be safe today, okay? If you need anything, call me at the station. I'm going to avoid going on any calls today, but if I'm out, you can get me on the radio." He paused, looking down at her. "You'll be okay by yourself, yeah?"

"Yes," she smiled back.

"Okay then," he said, ruffling her hair in a way she always pretended to hate, but truthfully loved more than just about anything else.

She watched from the porch as Hopper walked down to the Blazer and climbed in. Once they were up the driveway and turning onto the road, she walked back inside, locking the door behind her. Pajamas were calling, as was just one more Eggo.

As they drove toward town, Mike and Hopper were both lost in their own thoughts over everything they had learned. In just 24 hours, the stable, normal life they wanted for the girl they loved had started to crumble and neither knew if they would be able to fix it without her getting hurt all over again. Finally, Hopper broke the silence.

"So is everything alright at home? Do your parents really not care

that you just went AWOL during dinner and never came back? Are they going to notice that your not there tonight for dinner again?"

Mike sat quiet for a while before replying. "Things are...okay. Nancy covered for me last night and I'll call Mom later and say I'm going to Will's. Mom is kind of in her own world these days. And Dad, well, Dad is just Dad. He's never really taken much notice if I'm there or not. He decided a long time ago, once he realized I wasn't going to be some star athlete like him, that I was to much of a nerd to get into much trouble. After that, he didn't feel like he needed to take notice of me at all."

Hopper wasn't quite sure what to say to that. As a cop, he was used to dealing with all varieties of terrible parents. He had handled his share of angry abusers and neglectful drunks. "What do you do about parental indifference," he wondered to himself.

A few silent minutes later, Hopper pulled the Blazer to a stop out in front of the school and pulled Mike's bike out of the back.

"Alright, so I assume you want to come back over tonight?"

"Yeah, I mean, if that's alright," Mike answered, nervous that Hopper was about to go back on his deal.

Hopper, sensing Mike's sudden nerves, smiled and continued, "Oh calm down. Jane would kill me if I didn't bring you back tonight. I'm leaving the station at 4:30. Meet me there, or your biking yourself over. Under no circumstances are you to go over to the house by yourself today. Last night was a special case. Just because I'm grateful doesn't mean I like you. Got it?"

"Yeah, I understand," he smiled. "See you this afternoon."

9. Pandora's Boxes

Pandora's Boxes

Hawkins, IN

May 30, 1986

After what felt like the longest day of school he had ever experienced, the final bell mercifully set Mike free. Their friends had asked where El was and Mike had explained that she wasn't feeling well and that he was going over to see her once Hopper got off work. It was mostly true, though it sounded more like she was sick, rather than having her life tossed into turmoil. They accepted this answer as they all headed off to the arcade, while Mike went straight to the library and rushed through his homework, not wanting it looming over his head for the weekend. He also wasn't eager to get to the station too early. The prospect of hanging out quietly in the corner of Hopper's office was nowhere near the top of the list of his favorite activities.

Once he could stand the wait no longer, Mike packed up and biked over to the station, timing it perfectly so that Hopper was just heading out to the Blazer as he arrived. After another quiet ride out to the house, they turned down the driveway and pulled up to the house. As they left the Blazer and headed toward the porch, Eleven was there to greet them. She practically tackled Mike as she leapt off the porch and wrapped him in a hug. It was only the fact that he was used to this greeting that she didn't manage to knock him to the ground. She planted a quick kiss on his cheek, bringing a rosy flush to his face.

"Nice to see you too," Hopper teased, eliciting a blush from Eleven as well.

"Hi Daddy," she smiled with an exaggerated sweetness, still keeping Mike wrapped up tight in her arms.

With an exasperated groan, Hopper walked past the two of them and

up onto the porch. Mike and Eleven eventually untangled from one another and followed him inside.

After dropping his shoes and backpack by the door, Mike followed the others into the kitchen. Hopper couldn't help but notice both of them casting curious glances at the file boxes on the counter.

"Okay, dinner first," he declared. "I have a feeling after we go through those," he continued, nodding toward the boxes, "none of us are going to feel much like eating. And I don't think the pizza is going to heat well for a third time."

Around lunch, Hopper had called home to check on Eleven, and asked her to throw last night's untouched pizza into the oven to reheat for dinner. The box now sat on the counter, steaming hot and smelling delicious. They all grabbed drinks and plates, dished up a few slices and settled at the table once more to eat. They did their best to make small-talk, discussing their days and pretending it was anything close to a normal family dinner. Inside, each was lost in thought about what the boxes could contain. Hopper knew in general what was to be found, but even Mike and Eleven knew that nothing good could come in secret boxes from Hawkins lab.

After finishing off the pizza and clearing the table, Hopper walked over to the fridge to grab a beer, feeling he was going to need it before the night was done.

"Alright you two, grab those boxes and bring them into the living room," he instructed. "Might as well rip this band-aid off."

Eleven looked puzzled first at Hopper, who was already turning to head into the other room, then questioningly at Mike. She had needed band-aids a few times, after getting cuts and scrapes, but she wasn't sure what that had to do with boxes of paperwork.

Seeing her confusion, Mike explained, "it's just a saying that means to get something unpleasant over with quickly. Like when you need to take a sticky band-aid off, it doesn't help to go slow or to wait, sometimes it is better to just to rip it off all at once."

She thought about it for a moment and decided it made much more

sense than a lot of other phrases she had learned in the last two years, so she let it go at that. They each picked up a box and followed Hopper into the living room, where they found him pushing the coffee table away from the couch and across to the far side of the room. That left them with a large open space to spread out. They set the boxes down and sat cross-legged next to each other, while Hopper settled down opposite them, his back resting against the chair.

"Okay, here's what's going to happen," he began. "The files in this box are not very pleasant, according to Dr. Owens. When the lab closed down, he offered them to me and I told him to hang onto them, in case we needed them someday. It looks like this is someday." He paused to take a breath, letting the gravity of what he was saying sink in. "Jane, I'm leaving the decision up to you for what we look at and what we don't. We can pull just the pages I know we need, or we can go through it all. Or, we can take these out back, have a bonfire and forget they ever existed."

If Hopper was being honest with himself, which was rarely the case, he was actually terrified to open the lids on these Pandora's boxes; afraid of the horrors that might come spilling out. Still he continued. "In these boxes, are Brenner's files on his grand project," he said, tapping the label on the end of one box. "I think we can agree it's a safe assumption there will be at least eleven files in here, but I wouldn't be surprised to find more. So take a minute, both of you, and decide what you want to do. Whatever is there, whatever we look at, we're not going to be able to unsee."

His speech complete, Hopper sat back against the chair once more and cracked open his beer. Eleven stared intently at the boxes, unsure of what she wanted to do. Like her Dad, she was more than a little afraid of what was in them. These were Papa's files. Somehow, just being around them left her feeling like was he standing there right now, staring disapprovingly down at her. On the other hand, the very life she was living now was in utter defiance of him. These files, everything he had kept secret from her, were one more strike against his grasp over her.

She looked first from the boxes, up into Mike's sweet brown eyes, deep with concern. She knew he wanted to do anything and everything to protect her from any more hurt. She looked then to

Hopper, his face streaked with its own worry. She knew what she wanted to do.

"We look," she stated, matter-of-factly.

Hopper breathed a long sigh out through his nose. He had known she was going to want to look; of course she would. Still, he had hoped just a little bit she would have gone with the bonfire idea.

"Okay then. Where do you want to start? We can find your file. Or we can look and see if there is a file marked twelve." He hesitated, afraid to offer a final choice, knowing in his gut it's the one she would choose. "Or, we can start at number one, and go through them all."

Eleven thought about it for a moment. She knew she was going to want to see everything, but she had to start small or she would lose her nerve.

"Me," she said, less assuredly this time.

Nodding his approval, Hopper reached out and lifted the lid off of the first box. Inside were numerous identical file folders of varying thickness. Between every few folders, breaking them into groups, were larger dividers. These were neatly labeled with a flag labeling the experiment number of that group. Hopper had assumed that they would be organized in such a fashion, as Dr. Owens had said he took them straight from the file cabinet in Brenner's office and boxed them, not even pausing to glance at the contents. He had wanted as little to do with the lab's old projects as possible. Still, he'd had a gut feeling they would be important at some point. What chilled Hopper to his core, looking into the box, was the number of groups.

He had been hoping beyond hope that Jane had been one of the last experiments, and so, would not even be in this first box. Instead, there she was, third from the end. Her's was one of the largest sections of folders, matched only by the section behind, labeled 012. Hopper reached a hand nervously into the box, as though some venomous snake were hiding among the pages, waiting to strike. He wrapped his fingers around the stack of folders in the section marked 011 and pulled them free. As he set the folders down on the carpet, he used his free hand to push the box off to the side, trying to put a

buffer between the horrors in it and his little girl's own stack.

He spread the stack out so the labels on the cover of each folder could be read. The first was marked Medical. Under that were several labeled Test Results with an accompanying range of dates, indicating the time period that folder covered. Finally, there were four folders marked Journal, again with accompanying date ranges. With no good place to start, Eleven reached out and picked up the first folder, and set it in her lap. Hopper swung around so that he was sitting next to her.

The two people who cared about her more than anything else in the world sat protectively on either side of her as she flipped open the folder. Inside were page after page of medical charts and notes. For the most part, they were the standard sort kept in every pediatrician's office, tracking height and weight, dates of immunizations, general notes from physicals, except her checkups were much more frequent than the average child. Affixed to the inside of the front cover was a brief biographical summary:

Experiment 011

Born: August 9, 1971

Weight: 6 lbs 11 oz

Length: 19 inches

Mother: Teresa Ives - Project Red Spark - Subject 417

Father: Unknown

Acquisition: August 9, 1971

Eleven looked up and smiled to herself for a brief moment; she had a birthday. So far, they hadn't had any idea when her birthday might be, nor even what year for certain. It turned out they had been correct on the year, which was a relief. Her birth certificate - the one Dr. Owens had succeeded in crafting and getting legally registered - had listed a birth date of April 17, 1971. Unfortunately, on anything official, she would always have to go with that, but in private, among friends and family, she would have a new reason to look forward to

August.

Turning her attention back to the folder, she began to flip through the actual pages of details. On the pages corresponding to her birthday checkups each year, a simple photograph was attached. Mike and Hopper studied these with intense interest. Mike couldn't help but feel sad for her once more, that these simple snapshots of a little girl against a bare white lab wall, would be the only childhood photos she would ever have. He resolved right then to borrow one of Jonathan's old cameras and start helping her get a collection of happier snapshots. Hopper, on the other hand, was growing more and more furious with every turn of the page at the cold and unfeeling details of a stolen childhood. More than once, he wanted to stuff the folders back in the box and grab a lighter on the way out to the yard. Still, he held his rage inside. This moment wasn't for him, this was for her.

Unaware of the emotional turmoil occurring on either side of her, Eleven stared hard at the photos as they went by. It was so strange to see herself as a small child. It had been rare to come across an actual mirror in the lab. Most of what she knew of her own features growing up had been from glances at her reflection in glass she would pass by. Now, looking back at times she had forgotten, she was shocked to see the transformation from little girl to experiment eleven. From ages one to five, she could see her hair growing to shoulder length, kept in either a braid or pigtails. It had been a lighter, sandy blond back then. She had been given real clothes to wear too. First, soft looking footie pajamas as an infant and later, dark blue overalls, like the ones Mama had shown her in her dream. As a five year old, she even had a small, sweet smile on her face in the snapshot.

Everything changed when she turned to the next page. The photograph taken as she turned six revealed a girl utterly transformed. Gone were the blond braids, replaced by stubble buzzed almost to the scalp. Gone were the comfy overalls, replaced by a thin, one piece hospital gown. Perhaps most heartbreaking of all, gone was any trace of a smile. The bright eyes that had gazed into the camera lens a year before now refused to rise from the floor. Mike could feel the beginnings of tears stinging his eyes, but he held them back. There would be time for all that later. Right now, there was a

daunting mountain of folders that still lay before them.

Each page after, the photos revealed a scared, small girl, a little taller than the year before, a little skinnier, a lot more lost to the world. The last page finally contained a photo of the Eleven they had met a mere two months after it was taken. Closing the folder, Eleven set it aside and picked up the first Test Results folder and flipped it open. Inside were detailed descriptions of tests she had been subjected to in the lab; some with her active participation, some just observing her. Countless charts and graphs filled out the bulk of the these folders. Here and there, a section of paper-tape was attached to the page with wavy lines Hopper recognized as having come from the brain monitoring equipment he had watched Dr. Owens attach to Will on numerous occasions. On the strips, a particular spike or flatline would be circled in red with contextless numbers jotted next to them. To someone who knew what they were looking at, these folders probably held a great deal of information but to the three of them, sitting on the living room carpet, there was very little to be learned.

Finally, they came to what turned out to be Brenner's personal journals. Contained in the thick folders, in Brenner's meticulous hand, were his detailed thoughts, observations and hopes regarding experiment eleven. There, in the first lines of the first folder, was the answer they had all been afraid they would find.

August 10, 1971

Experiment 011 and her identical twin sister, experiment 012, were successfully delivered yesterday and brought immediately to the lab. The children have been numbered in delivery order. Throughout the pregnancy, mother T. Ives was kept in the dark regarding the second fetus. She was heavily sedated during the extraction, though she revived momentarily to witness the birth of 012. She was promptly put under once more. With the assistance of our medical staff placed at the hospital, she has been convinced her daughter was stillborn, so there should be no risk of her attempting to reclaim the child.

Throughout her testing in the program, Ms. Ives showed some of the strongest markers of telekinetic ability we have ever recorded. As such, I have every confidence these two will have similar abilities which can be fostered from the earliest possible age, providing us with the most

invaluable results of the entire project.

Without warning, several tears splashed onto the yellowed pages. Two pairs of eyes snapped to Eleven's face with concern; her worst fears having been confirmed. Eleven let the folder fall from her fingers as her breath caught in her throat in a choked sob. Knowing comfort and support was waiting on either side, she turned and buried her face in Hopper's chest as he folded his arms around her. A part of her wanted Mike's loving arms around her as well, but in that moment, she needed Daddy more. Her mind was a storm of thoughts swirling one around another. She had a twin sister. Papa had written it down himself, in a place she was never supposed to see, so it couldn't be a lie. If she had a sister called Twelve, that was who she had seen last night. And that meant Papa still being alive was real too. Perhaps worst of all, though, was the revelation that Mama had seen Twelve being born, and not her. Twelve was the girl she called Jane; the girl Mama fought so hard to rescue.

She pulled back from Hopper, a question forming on her lips, not quite able to escape. She turned next to Mike, struggling to get the thought out.

"If I'm not Jane, who am I?" she finally choked out.

She dissolved to tears once more, falling into Mike this time, oblivious to the world. He wrapped her protectively in his arms, gently stroking her hair and whispering that he was there, that it would be alright. As she started to calm once more, he held her out, steadying her, so he could look deep into her soft brown eyes, so reddened by tears.

"You are still Jane. You were Jane the day Mama tried to save you in the Rainbow Room. You were Jane the day you came home to her. You were Jane when you found her in the In-Between so she could finally tell her story." He paused, making sure she was understanding what he was saying, then went on. "You are Eleven. You are El. You are Jane Ives and you are Jane Hopper. You are the girl who loves Eggos and picnics by the lake and sunrises. Names don't change who you are."

He reached a hand up and carefully wiped a final tear from her cheek

as the vaguest hint of smile pulled at the corners of her mouth.

"Thank you," she whispered, pulling in a deep breath at last.

Thinking that was enough for the night, Hopper started to gather the folders and tuck them back into their place. As he reached for the lid, Eleven suddenly said "Wait. Twelve next."

"I think you've been through enough for one day," Hopper tried to object.

"No. Rip off the band-aid," she said, throwing Hopper's phrase back at him.

With a resigned sigh he fished out the next stack folders. Eleven grabbed the Medical folder off the top of the stack and flipped it open. The summary inside the cover was identical to her own with the exception of the experiment designation at the top. She began to leaf through the pages of medical summary and annual photos. She had to see for herself this girl who apparently grew up alongside her, somewhere else in the lab. The first few photos could have been copies of Eleven's own, but they began to depart at age two. Where Eleven transitioned into the comfy overalls, Twelve was given athletic wear. Her medical records also included additional entries beyond the regular physicals. Where Eleven had been a quiet and gentle child, Twelve had been much more rough and active, having suffered a broken leg at age 3 and a broken arm at 4. In both cases, the accompanying notes expressed amazement at how much faster she healed than was normal for a child her age.

Eleven continued flipping the pages, unconsciously looking for a certain picture. Though she didn't realize it, she wanted to know what happened to Twelve when she turned six. Another turn and there it was. Eleven's heart sank. No gown. No shaved head. Twelve stood there, smile as big as ever, in a bright red track suit, her hair pulled back in a tight braid. She turned again and again. Year after year, a little taller, a little more fit, the same big smile. Each year a new track suit, green, blue, purple, red. In the last photo stood a smiling Twelve in a gray track suit, a bandolier of throwing knives slung over one shoulder and across her chest. Eleven stared in disbelief. Not only was she clothed and given weapons, this final

photo was taken outside in a back corner of the lab grounds near a cluster of trees. In the background was the very pipe a terrified Eleven had used to escape weeks later as a monster from another dimension tore apart the lab.

A new rage began to grow in Eleven, like the first sparks of a match about to ignite. She had known Papa was a bad man. She had suspected, since she was Eleven, others like her had been taken and turned into his twisted experiments. But she had always assumed they were treated just like her. Locked away in a little room with a little bed and a lamp and a gown and a stuffed cat. Instead, her own sister, living somewhere else in the building, got to have real clothes, weapons, exercise, sunshine; she got to go outside.

She was breathing hard now. Hopper recognized the look of determination on her face; he had seen it the night she marched headlong back into the lab to end things once and for all. Mike was concerned just how much the revelations of her sister were affecting her.

"Hey, are you alright?" he asked, resting a hand on her arm.

She flipped the the folder closed and set it back on the stack before her. Ignoring Mike's question, she turned to Hopper and said, "Number One."

He didn't like that she was doing this to herself, but he knew she had more right to look at the folders, than he had right to refuse. He fished the stack out labeled 001. The medical charts seemed to be the most revealing, so she flipped that open first.

Experiment 001

Born: June 9, 1956

Name: Brandon

Acquired: July 14, 1963, 12th Street Park, Chicago, IL

Deceased: December 4, 1967

Complications during administration of psychoactive drug, X-47-R

She flipped quickly through the pages, stopping to examine each photo. He was a scared young boy who looked in each photo like he had been recently crying, but like Twelve, he had been allowed clothes.

She shut the file and asked for the next.

Experiment 002 had been a girl, age nine, taken in 1964 in Mexico City. Her file contained no photographs. A year after being taken, the lab had determined she possessed no special abilities and was of no further use to them. Electroshock therapy was administered until she had no recollection of who or where she was. She was then abandoned at a hospital in Chicago. Eleven naturally thought of Mama; the lab was apparently well practiced at destroying the minds of people they wanted out of the way.

Numbers three through six all were taken in 1965. Two boys and another girl. All were given gowns like Eleven. All were terrified in their photos. One boy and the girl turned out to be of no use and were scrambled and abandoned within a year; one at a hospital in New York, the other dropped off at a homeless camp in California. The other boy stayed at the lab until 1969, when his file was closed out just stating that he was deceased, with no explanation of how. Eleven could only suspect the horrible things Papa's men probably did that they wouldn't want to write down.

On she went through the stacks. Mike watched in growing horror as the folders began to pile up; each representing a childhood lost and destroyed by the evil that was Hawkins lab. Not knowing what else to do, he laid a comforting hand on her back as she read, if nothing else than to remind her that support was there if she needed him. Hopper sat there, handing over stack after stack of files. For his part, the combined instincts of cop and father were telling him that someday he would have to go through these folders and see if anything could be done to bring closure for these families.

In 1966, two children were taken by the lab. 007 was a two year old boy who died of the flu within months of being brought to the lab. This surprised Eleven. The lab had always been kept so clean and controlled, she had never had so much as a cold growing up there. It hadn't been until she was living in the cabin that she got sick for the

first time when Hopper "brought home a bug from the station" as he had put it. The other child taken, she had been waiting for. 008. Kali, taken in London, England at the age of five. Eleven already knew she had been allowed the same overalls, though she got to keep them longer.

Escaped: March 19, 1976 - Whereabouts unknown

During a power failure, 008 was spotted by guards trying to access the rooms of other subjects. Suspect she was seeking out experiment 011. Guards gave chase and she made it out the front door. Used her mental projections to hide herself until guards were gone then made her escape off grounds.

New failsafe lockdown measures put in place in case of future power failures.

After taking Kali, it seemed the lab was satisfied with progress for a while. Inevitably though, the abductions resumed in 1970 with experiments nine and ten. Number thirteen, a boy in a gown, finished out the first box. Hopper tried once more to persuade her to stop for the night, but she persisted, so he cracked the lid on the second box. Folder after folder, stolen childhood upon stolen childhood. By the end, she wasn't even looking at Hopper, or the box, between folders. She just kept calling for the next one, determined to see each and every child the lab ripped from the life they could have had and locked them away in the world that would become their prison.

Eventually, she came to number 023. A little girl, seized from Ontario, Canada in 1980 at the age of three. Like Eleven, she was stripped of regular clothes and given a gown and a very short haircut. Sad, downcast eyes in all three of her photos. Her time at the lab ended in pneumonia at the age of 5. Feeling a connection to this little girl, so much like herself in how the lab had treated her, Eleven found herself drawn to Papa's journal. She flipped to the middle and read a few sentences. Apparently at age three, she had already been able to crush the pop can for him. She could look at a picture of someone and tell Papa where they were in the lab. Eleven felt her heart breaking for this poor little girl, so much like her, and feeling in some way that perhaps she had gotten lucky, dying before Papa could force her into the bath to chase Russians and monsters. That hurt

even more, realizing that death was preferable to the things that happened in the lab.

She quickly wiped a tear from her eye and demanded, "Next!" perhaps a little more curtly than she intended. When no folder appeared, she looked up at Hopper, his face a gray wash of exhaustion.

"That's it. She was the last one," he replied, wearily, looking at the piles of folders scattered all around them. He had given up on putting the folders away eight shattered lives ago.

"Good," she whispered, much more gently. The determination that had fueled her through the boxes washed away and left her feeling exhausted and heartsick. Pushing away the pile in front of her, she slid her feet out and leaned back against the couch. Only then did she allow the tears out that had been begging to break free for hours. Onward they fell, not in anguished sobs but in silent streams for lives lost and forgotten. Quickly losing the fight to keep her eyes open, she leaned her head onto Mike's shoulder. He wrapped an arm around her back and pulled her closer.

Hopper, his beer long finished, stood and wandered off to the kitchen in search of something a little stronger. He pulled a bottle down from the top of the cupboards that he kept around for just such an occasion. Only after pouring a generous glass of the dark, amber spirits did he look at the clock on the wall and realize it was after one in the morning. Suddenly he was incredibly grateful all this had happened on a Friday night. He worried briefly about whether Mike would be in trouble for being missing once more but decided that was a problem for Saturday morning Hopper. Very late Friday night Hopper needed to sit down before he collapsed.

Walking back into the living room, he noticed Eleven and Mike were both fast asleep, her nestled close into his side, him with both arms protectively around her. Once more, father Hopper wanted to pull them apart and tuck his little girl safely in bed. Practical Hopper knew that right now being wrapped up in Mike's arms was exactly what his little girl needed. Father Hopper hated practical Hopper sometimes; the smug jerk. He took a long swallow of his drink, hoping to make practical Hopper go away, but no such luck. Setting

his drink down for a minute, he grabbed a blanket and covered the two sleeping kids. Retrieving his drink once more, he shut off all but the hallway light and headed off for his own bed.

Somewhere deep in her mind, Eleven knew that fresh nightmares would take shape from all she had read tonight, and the journals she knew she would eventually read. But that would be another night. Tonight, wrapped tightly in Mike's protective arms, the nightmares would stay away.

10. Papa's Journals

Papa's Journals

Hawkins, IN

June 9, 1986

The next morning, Hopper had found them still together in the living room, laying on their sides now, Mike still wrapped protectively around her. Hopper had realized upon waking that once again, with Mike there, her nightmares seemed to have stayed away for the night. He had woken them while he stacked the files back into their boxes, organizing as he went so they could be found again as needed.

Over breakfast, Hopper and Mike once again joined forces in expressing their concern over everything she had read, and begged her not to read the journals without one of them being there. While she was a little resentful that they acted like she couldn't handle the gory details alone, she knew their hearts were in the right place and for that she was grateful. She knew they sometimes forgot she had actually lived much of what was written in those countless pages.

At Hopper's insistence, she had gone back to bed to rest, once more having little energy to fight him. Mike returned home and let himself in through the basement. When he walked upstairs, his parents greeted him and asked if he had slept down there all night again; they hadn't even noticed he never came home. He lied and said yes, if nothing else than to avoid having to talk to them further about it.

At school on Monday, Eleven was back to normal, more or less. Physically she was recovered from the ordeal, and mentally, she had processed enough of what she saw that it didn't cause her to break down. That week was their last of school before the start of Summer break, so there was plenty to do and enough distractions that she managed to not go looking for the journals.

That weekend, Hopper took Mike and Eleven out fishing. It had been a tradition with his own father growing up, as a way to kick off

summer vacation. Not long after moving back from the cabin, Hopper had decided that he needed a personal car in addition to the department Blazer, now that his life was not 100% devoted to being a cop. He knew Jane didn't need the town constantly reminded she was the Chief's daughter, and on trips out of town, it was more appropriate taking his own car. Eleven wasn't particularly interested in the fishing itself, but it meant she got to sit snuggled up to Mike in the backseat of the car for several hours on the drive without him giving them exasperated looks all the time.

It was only once Monday rolled around that her resolve to ignore the journals started to fall apart. She was home alone. Mike wasn't allowed to be over without Hopper there, and he was at work. She sat in her room and read a book. She told herself she wasn't going to think about the journals. She walked into the kitchen to get a snack. She refused to look at the boxes stacked in the corner of the living room on her way through. She went back to her room and worked on a puzzle Mike had given her; a basket of kittens. She told herself she was doing good, not thinking about the journals. She walked out to the kitchen to fix lunch. Sitting at the kitchen table she flipped through a fashion magazine Nancy had given her. Eleven didn't care much about the articles, but some of the pages were ads for perfumes, and those smelled pretty. She was proud of herself, doing such a good job not thinking about the journals. She walked back to her room again.

Eleven settled on her bed and separated the journals into two neat stacks; one for her's, one for Twelve's. She knew she shouldn't look - these were Papa's words and nothing he had to say could be good - but still she started reading. She alternated between reading her own, and her sister's, in an effort to keep roughly in sync between the two. For the first year, the pages were roughly duplicates of one another, although Papa had taken the time to write separate entries in both. The passages detailed Papa's observations, tests that were administered to look for specific special gifts, things like that. Mostly Papa was waiting for the girls to give him some sign of abilities. The biggest surprise, though she realized it it shouldn't come as much of a shock, was that Papa had decided as soon as they were born to raise the girls entirely separate from one another. His theory was that once the girls had displayed some degree of powers, the separation would

allow him to tailor an environment for each that would nurture their gifts.

Just before the girls turned one, Papa got the birthday present he had been waiting for. On a day when Twelve was being particularly disagreeable, the lab caregivers had been at their wits end trying to figure out what would calm her down. Finally, as she was offered a bottle of formula once more, Twelve had reached out one chubby little arm and from across the room, pulled over her favorite stuffed rabbit. Immediately, she settled down, while the caregivers in the room went into a panic. They all had some idea about the kinds of things the children might do someday, but to actually see it happen before their eyes was something entirely different. Papa, according to his writings, was overjoyed.

Right away, in her own room, Eleven was repeatedly given toys to determine her favorites, only to have them taken away and placed on the far side of the room to see if she could get them back. Eleven, of course, had no idea what it was they wanted her to do, so she had just watched in quiet curiosity as they shoved toy after toy into her tiny hands and then took them away again. While he was disappointed, Papa wasn't entirely surprised; this first display had been an involuntary reaction rather than deliberate act. It took Twelve almost a year before she repeated the action.

She had made it through their second birthday when Eleven realized that Hopper would be home soon. Guiltily, she filed the journals back into their proper spots and replaced the lid on the box. Ever observant, Hopper knew as soon as he got home that she had gone into the boxes. It was a small detail, but the swirled pattern on the lid matched up with the pattern on the sides of the box only when it was closed in one direction; she had put the lid on the other way around when she closed it back up. He wasn't sure if was going to be a problem or not, but he decided to say nothing about it. Over dinner, she seemed her usual, cheery self, and she was never one to hide what she was feeling; hiding her feelings was like lying, and everyone knew her thoughts on that.

Hopper listened closer than usual as Eleven had her nightly chat with Mike that evening. Though he could only hear half of the conversation, he was pleased that nothing seemed to come up

regarding journals or the lab, or anything like that. He hoped that perhaps he had been wrong about her looking at the journals after all as he sat in the living room with the newspaper.

The next day was more of the same. Eleven tried her very hardest to leave the journals alone. She even made it back to her room after lunch without grabbing them. An hour later, though, she lost the fight again and dug once more into her past. After age two, the girls began to differ greatly in their abilities. Twelve had shown strong, deliberate abilities to move things around with her thoughts. She was pulling heavier and heavier objects around, or throwing them away from herself. By four she was well on her way to becoming a dangerous weapon. Papa had found that her progress grew rapidly under his constant praise; she thrived on trying to make him happy and proud. To that end, he moved her out of her room near the caretakers and into a little room on the top floor of the lab, right next to his own.

Eleven, on the other hand, wasn't showing the same levels of promise as her sister. She could perform basic, small movements on objects; she could reach out with her thoughts and roll a pencil or slide a glass of water across the table. But her strength was nowhere near that of Twelve. Papa had been considering sending her away like so many of the children who had failed to live up to his expectations. However, his option changed entirely a little before she turned four. It struck him one day that whenever he entered her room, she was already standing and looking expectantly at the door. After conferring with some of the caregivers, they confirmed that she did the same thing with them. He had a camera installed in the corner of her room to correspond to the one out in the hallway. Sure enough, as people would approach her room, she would stop what she was doing, rise to her feet and wait expectantly for whatever activity was to come.

"Remarkable," he had described it in the journal. It was with a bittersweet smile that she recalled all the times he had told her she was remarkable; always when she had revealed some new depth to her abilities, that he could further exploit.

He went on to describe the game he had created to test his theory about her powers. It was a game she could, in some distant part of

her memory, recall. He would hand her a drawing of the section of the lab she lived in, and 5 photographs. Sometimes it was people she knew, sometimes lab workers she had never met.

"Find where they are hiding, Eleven," he would instruct her.

She would close her eyes and think, and somehow it would come to her where each person was. She would lay the pictures in the different rooms to indicate where those people were right then. According to Papa's notes, even before she turned four, she was already right more than 90% of the time. Even the times she thought she did bad because she couldn't find them, she was actually right.

"I can't find them Papa," she would tearfully tell him.

"Next time, you'll do better," he would say, cold and matter-of-factly.

All these years later, reading through his notes, she could remember how much it hurt to disappoint him. It turned out, most of the times she couldn't find someone, it was a picture he had slipped into the pile of a person nowhere near the lab. It was a test to see just how far her reach could go to find someone. The further she read, the more she realized her whole life had been a carefully orchestrated lie.

Onward she read, through age four. Through age five. Papa's special plans for both girls; how to get the best results. For Twelve, intense training and boundless loving attention from Papa. For Eleven, an isolated existence bordering on abandonment. The sad, frail girl who refused to look at the camera made more sense with every page she read. Around age eight, she just couldn't go any further. Not bothering to remove the folders from her bed she freed half of a blanket and pulled it around her body like a protective cocoon and laid her head on her pillow. She sniffled as the tears began to fall. They were not tears of anguish or deep sorrow. There was a general sadness behind them, but more than anything, they were the tears of being overwhelmed.

Mike had explained the term to her during one of their study sessions, getting her ready to start school, and it seemed to fit the situation now. "It's like, when you have so many different thoughts going through your head all at once. And they all feel super

important at the same time. And you try to grab a thought and deal with it, but it slips away as you grab at another."

Somewhere among the tears and the overwhelmed and the sad, she drifted off to sleep.

"Jane, I'm home," Hopper called sometime later as he hung his hat on the hook by the door and removed his holster. He looked around in concern when she didn't answer.

Instinctively he looked at the boxes in the corner of the room, but the lid was still in place where it had been that morning. He walked down the hall to her bedroom and pushed open the door.

"Shit," he swore, not in anger but in the confirmation of what he had known he was going to find.

There she was, still curled tight in a blanket ball, asleep but murmuring fitfully. Her cheeks were streaked raw where the tears had long since dried. All around her, spread open and spilling their horrible secrets, were Brenner's journals. He knew he should have taken the boxes to the station until they had decided how best to go through them. He should have explained to her better that living through the life detailed in those pages, and reading that sadistic son of a bitch's every thought and motivation behind them would be two vastly different experiences. He resigned himself to the fact that, now that she had started reading them, there would be nothing to do but finish them. He gathered the journals into a single pile and scooped them up.

"Jane." He leaned down and gently shook her shoulder, "Jane. Time to wake up Jane."

Her eyes fluttered open and darted around the room in a panic, trying to clear the fog and sort out where she was. She had been dreaming she was once more in her little room in the lab, and Papa had just come to take her down to the bath again. Her eyes landed on Hoppers face and she relaxed with relief.

"Daddy?" she asked. Her eyes slid down to the stack of journals held in his other arm and she shrank back in panic, quickly sitting up and

pulling her knees to her chest. "I'm sorry. I know you said not to look at them without you. I tried not to look. I'm so sorry."

The apologies came pouring out faster than she could form them. Part of her brain was still back in the lab, remembering the terrible things Papa did when she was bad. Daddy would never do those things to her, she knew that, but in the moment it was hard to pull those thoughts out of the haze.

Startled at the panic, he quickly pulled her into a hug with his free arm. "Shhh," he soothed, "it's okay. I'm not mad. It's okay."

She looked at his face again and saw the truth in what he was saying. The rest of the fog cleared and fresh tears threatened to break loose once more.

"Come on. You need something to perk you back up and we'll figure out what to do about these," he said, indicating the stack of journals. He stood and held out an arm to her. She climbed into his arm, wrapped herself around his side and rested her head on his shoulder. It was one of those early childhood habits she had missed out on, but had instinctively picked up when they were living in the cabin. When she was upset, she liked to be carried. Hopper wasn't sure how many years his back could withstand it, but right then, he didn't mind one bit as he carried her and the journals down the hall toward the kitchen.

After a plate of Eggos and a mug of cocoa had worked their healing magic, he nodded at the stack of journals in the middle of the table.

"So how far did you get?" he asked, fighting to keep any tone of accusation out of his voice.

"Eight years," she admitted, feeling slightly ashamed for looking at them; partly because he had asked her not to, partly because he had been right that reading them alone was a bad idea.

"For both of you, or just one?"

"Both of us."

"That was pretty smart doing them together," he complimented,

eliciting a half smile from her. He was impressed she had thought to try and process everything together rather than reading one set of journals and then going to back twelve years to start again.

"So here's what I think we need to do. You're not going to get any peace until you've finished these journals and I'm not going to get any peace if I am worrying about you sitting here by yourself reading them. So you're going to go put on your fluffiest pajamas and brush your teeth. You're going to grab your favorite blankets and a pillow and your bear, and you're going to build yourself a little nest on the couch. I'm going to get a stiff drink and a box of tissues." He paused, shaking his head at how ridiculous this was sounding, "and I am going to sit right there on the couch with you and read you the worst bedtime story ever."

At that, they broke down into a genuine fit of laughter at the absurdity of his suggestion. It was rare to get more than a giggle from her, so full on laughter in spite of everything that was happening reassured Hopper that his little girl was not broken by all of this; she was a survivor. After they had caught their breath, they went their separate ways to run through his checklist and then met back up on the couch to finish what she had started.

Despite missing out on the first two-thirds of the lives detailed on those old pages, Hopper started right where she remembered leaving off. She hated to admit it, but somehow, snuggled into her warm couch-nest and hearing Hopper's voice reading the details, made it all a little easier to hear. It helped even more that she could see his face reacting to the things he was reading. Seeing his face get red and angry let her know that the things that happened were not okay. Seeing him shed a tear, quickly wiped away, reassured her that she had someone who cared that all these things had happened to her. Several times he paused to re-read a passage to himself, side by side with corresponding notes in the other journal. Those were the times he would get the maddest, comparing the treatment of Eleven and Twelve, and he would angrily grab for his drink, only to remember he had finished it a year and half back.

Eventually, agonizingly, they came to the end. Twelve's final entry was dated November 4th, 1983. It was a routine note on her latest strength tests and how she had been able to mentally lift a car and

float it from one end of the testing floor to the other, but that it had left her badly drained afterwards. Hopper couldn't help but chuckle at a thought that came to him then. Throughout Brenner's notes, he had always felt that Twelve had the stronger abilities in physical telekinesis. Little did he know that just days after penning this note, he would witness a neglected and abused Eleven toss a full-size van end-over-end and almost crush him with it. Eleven's final entry brought another satisfied smile to his face.

November 7, 1983

Experiment Eleven escaped the grounds of the lab last night during a containment incident. Additional measures are being prepared on her room for her return. As she can no longer be trusted, an exterior lock has been added to her door. An additional guard armed with tranquilizers will be stationed in her hallway, and accompany her on all excursions from her housing.

Recovery should be swift. The girl has never been outside of the lab, much less off grounds. She will be unprepared to cope with the outside world and will likely return of her own volition, without further incident.

Hopper couldn't help but marvel at just how wrong the wise Dr. Martin Brenner had been about a great many things. He had spent twelve years underestimating Jane at every step and she was living proof of how much he misjudged her. Hopper closed the final journals and set them back onto the coffee table. Looking over at Eleven, he was pleased to see the vaguest hint of smile even as she wiped once more at her eyes. She snaked a free hand out from her twist of blankets and grasped his hand.

"Thank you," she whispered, leaning her head back and closing her eyes.

He sat for a long time, just watching her sleep, eventually tucking her hand back in among the warm blankets. His attention fell once more on the pile of journals. It had been heart wrenching just getting through the final four years, but he knew that was only part of the story. After fixing a fresh drink, he settled into his recliner and opened the first two journals to their starting entries and began reading. It took until almost three in the morning, and two more

drinks, but he finally reached the point where they had started, hours before. As he set down the journals once more, he had already decided that if Dr. Brenner was truly alive, still out there and trying to carry on his experiments, he had to be stopped once and for all.

To say Hopper was angry would have been an understatement; he was in a boiling rage. If the lab hadn't already been closed, he was quite certain he would have driven over right then and burned the entire place to the ground. He also felt a fresh mountain of guilt weighing him down as he turned to look at her once more, her bear hugged tight to her chest. The last few years that she, and so many others, had been prisoners of the lab, he was the local Chief of Police. So many of the things that happened to her, happened in a place and time where he was responsible for the safety of everyone in the area, and he had unknowingly failed her. Perhaps worst of all was the guilt that, were it not for everything that had happened in the lab, she wouldn't be here with him now; wouldn't be his little girl. Everything she had endured had shaped his Jane into the strong, amazing young woman she had become, and that wasn't something he would trade for anything.

Not again; that was a guilt he kept locked away somewhere deep.

11. A Second Try

A Second Try

Hawkins, IN

June 11, 1986

The next morning, Eleven was startled to discover she was still wrapped up in her nest on the couch. Normally, even when she fell asleep out in the living room, Hopper would move her to bed sometime during the night. Looking around, she spotted him fast asleep in his chair, the entire pile of journals stacked on the table next to him. It warmed her even more to know that he had gone back and read them from the beginning after she fell asleep, to know her full story. She had woken up at one point and silently watched him reading until sleep overtook her once more. Not wanting to wake him, she quietly untangled herself from the blanket pile and headed down the hall to take a shower.

Over breakfast, Hopper watched her with concerned optimism. She seemed to be handling everything she had heard extremely well. That made enough sense for her own journals, but he was surprised at how well she was dealing with all she had learned about her new sister. Sibling rivalry could be a nasty business in the most normal, well adjusted families. In this case, kept apart and secret from each other, on top of Brenner's carefully orchestrated preferential treatment of Twelve, he wouldn't have been the least surprised if Eleven held some level of jealousy or a grudge.

"So how are you doing, really?" he finally asked. "I know that was a lot to deal with last night."

She thought about it for a moment, before deciding, "Okay, I guess. Confused. A little sad." She hesitated, before continuing, "I knew Papa was bad. It shouldn't surprise me he was a liar too."

"What about Twelve?" he asked. He could tell there was something she was holding back, possibly even from herself, and he didn't want

to leave for the station until they had uncovered what it was. He didn't want it to eat away at her all day while no one was around. As soon as the words left his mouth, he could tell he had found what he was looking for.

He watched as her face fell once more while her mind formed the question that had been swirling around for days now; possibly for years.

"Did Papa love me?" she asked, fighting the tears that burned at the corners of her eyes once more. She was getting tired of crying all the time. Mike had said tears helped you to feel better when something makes you sad or overwhelmed, but lately they were just leaving her feeling weak and small.

Hopper sat frozen at the question, unsure how to answer. He had formed a pretty good idea of Brenner's thoughts regarding both girls while reading through his personal journals. At the same time, how could he look her in the eyes and tell her the truth? Brenner, for all his evil, had literally been her entire world, particularly in her later years before she escaped. Even years later, fully aware of the realities of the world, he still had a powerful hold in her heart and mind. Her mantra ran through his head once more; friends don't lie. He had to be honest with her.

He pulled his chair around the table and sat next to her, wrapping one of her hands in both of his. "No. I don't think he did."

He waited to see how she would react. The start of a single sob caught in the back of her throat but she cleared it with a deep breath. He went on, "I also don't think he loved Twelve. I think he was a manipulative man who calculated the exact right things to say, and not say, to both of you to try and achieve the goals of his twisted experiments. Does that make sense?"

"Yes," she whispered, sadly.

"I'm sorry, Jane," he soothed, putting an arm around her shoulder and pulling her close. "I really am."

She slowly pushed her chair back from the table. "I think I want to go

back to bed."

"Okay," he said. "I'm going to go get dressed. I'll come tuck you in before I leave for the station. Sound good?"

"Yes," she said, giving an almost halfway happy smile.

After climbing into a fresh uniform and strapping his holster back onto his waist, he headed down the hall to Eleven's room. He gently knocked and pushed the door open. She had built a fresh blanket nest on her bed and climbed inside, cocooning herself against the world. He also couldn't help but notice that she had grabbed the spare pillow from the hall closet, the one Mike had used the night he stayed over, and was currently hugging that in place of her bear. At this point, if the fleeting presence of that boy had any beneficial effect on her, he welcomed it. As he sat on the edge of the bed, she opened one eye to look up at him.

"I'm heading off to the station now," he began. "If you need anything at all today, call me. Please."

"Okay," she nodded. "I'll be alright," she said, working up another half smile.

"Is there anything special you would like for dinner tonight?"

She shrugged; nothing really sounded good at the moment, "Whatever you want."

"Okay. But seriously, anything at all, call me." He leaned down and planted a kiss on her forehead, "I love you, Jane."

"I love you too, Daddy"

He stood and walked out, half closing the door as he went. The whole drive to work, a thought nagged at the back of his mind. He hoped he was wrong, and he knew there would be nothing he could do about it if he was right. As he parked, he mouthed a quick prayer to whatever power might be listening, "Please don't let her go looking for Brenner and the girl."

After getting another hour of sleep, Eleven snapped awake with a

renewed purpose. Papa had taught her how to use her gifts to find people, wherever they might be. He taught her how to watch and listen and figure out what they were up to. Now, she was going to use her gifts to find him; to figure out what he was up to. If he was trying to hurt people, he would have to be stopped. If he was looking for her, or Daddy, or Mike, or any of her friends, he would have to be stopped. If he was minding his own business, she would leave him alone and try her very hardest to forget about him, and her sister.

If she was being honest with herself, she was actually more curious about her sister than Papa. She had seen her just the one time, finding Papa that first night, but she felt she knew all there was to know about her after reading Papa's journals. At the same time, this girl with her face, was still a mystery. Eleven knew that she, herself, was a very different girl than the picture that Papa's notes had painted. She figured that Twelve would probably be the same.

Not knowing how far she would have to reach to find them again, she turned her radio on to static and pulled the blindfold down over her eyes. Curious what would happen, she focused not on the image of Papa, but of the girl in the photos. It felt strange, as though she were trying to find herself out in the In-Between, but after a few minutes of searching, she came into focus. As it turned out, she could have searched either for her, or for Papa. When the world around Twelve began to resolve, Eleven realized that Papa was standing right there next to her. They were outside of a small white house, clearly waiting for someone. Papa checked his watch with obvious annoyance.

Sensing that this was home for them, Eleven pulled her focus back further to take in more of the surroundings and try to get an idea of where they were. The names McChord and Washington came forth into her mind. She filed these names away for later, once she decided just what she was going to do with these two. Focusing back in once more, she watched as a black four-door car pulled up. A man in a dark green uniform - like the men who used to guard the lab wore - got out of the driver's seat and opened the back door for Papa and Twelve. As they climbed in and settled into their seats, Eleven pushed her focus into the car with them, settling somewhere in the middle of the front seat, looking back at them.

As the car began to move once more, she watched Papa pull a stack

of folders out of his briefcase and begin to read through the paperwork inside. Twelve occupied herself by watching out the window. Not far from the house, they passed a large paved field lined with airplanes and Eleven realized that this place, McChord, must be an airport. She had seen planes several times watching the evening news with Hopper, but seeing these huge gray aircraft in person, she could only stare in awe at their immense size. Soon, their car fell in line with several large, dark green trucks, and together they made their way onto the highway.

For the next two and a half hours Eleven sat in silence, just watching Papa and her sister. Throughout most of the drive, Papa kept his eyes focused on page after page of documents, occasionally penning a note into the margins. Twelve, on the other hand, spent the majority of the ride in silence, alternating between watching the scenery going by and inspecting her special set of knives. She would unroll the bundle, slip one out, float it up, give it a gentle spin, and then return it to its proper sleeve. Several times, she had looked longingly at radio in the car's dash, but kept her silence and didn't ask for music. For the most part, she simply looked bored. The drive took them up through a mountain pass, long clear of snow as the early summer sun beat down. As they approached a second set of smaller ridges, Twelve began to look nervous. Realizing they were getting close to their destination, Papa put away his paperwork as well and turned to look at Twelve for the first time since leaving home.

"So you understand today's game, right?" he asked.

"Yes Papa," she smiled, pleased that she was finally able to speak again. Papa got very angry when she interrupted his work, so she knew better than to speak while he was reading.

"We have a limited number of tries today. General Peters wasn't as open to the idea of further testing as he was the first time, but I told him how much you have been practicing and how much stronger you are than last month," he said, pouring on the praise in hopes of boosting her confidence enough to make some real progress. "We have two of the smaller ones for warm up. These are the ones you could hold back last time. After that, I was able to get us six of the bigger ones that you couldn't quite do. I know you can do it this time."

"I'll do it this time Papa, I know I can do it." she responded, fighting to hide the doubt in her voice.

Eleven sat and stared in puzzlement, trying to guess at just what this test was going to be. It had to be something big and secret if they were having to drive for hours out into the middle of nowhere to do it. She could almost feel the nerves radiating off of Twelve as they turned off the highway and onto a dirt road leading out into an empty, barren landscape. Eleven was actually beginning to feel sorry for her sister, who was clearly afraid that she would fail Papa's test. He had mentioned her failing this particular test before; had she been punished in the dark room for her failure or was that another one of the ways Papa treated them differently?

Not far off the highway, the trucks turned off into a wide clearing, while the car continued down the road for several more miles. They passed an area with large holes that looked to Eleven like they had been burned into the ground. A little beyond, the car slowed to a stop and Papa and Twelve climbed out. The man in the driver's seat got out and retrieved a dark green backpack from the trunk, passing it to Papa before getting back behind the wheel. Papa then handed it over to Twelve.

"Here you go. Just like last time, some water and lunch." He pulled a slip of paper out of his jacket pocket and handed it to her, "and here is the schedule. The first launch will be at 11:45. That gives you 15 minutes to get ready."

Eleven watched as he placed both hands on her shoulders, then a moment later, pulled her into a hug. "You're going to do great today. I know you can do it, Twelve. I'm so proud of you."

As he released her from the embrace, Twelve smiled brightly back, "Thank you Papa!"

Eleven stood stunned at the display of affection, so out of character for the Papa that she knew. The closest he had come to hugging her in all their years in the lab was when he carried her back to her room on the occasions where the tests left her too drained to walk. Her focus was quickly pulled back to the present as she realized Papa was climbing back into the car and she had to choose whether to say with

Twelve, or go with him. In the end, she decided to get back in the car with Papa, knowing that she could always bring herself back here if she needed to. They drove on in silence until they wound to the top of a ridge overlooking the vast field of burned holes. Standing at the edge of the field, Eleven could just make out Twelve, pacing nervously and checking her watch.

Eleven shifted her focus to see Papa's watch and saw it was 11:46, one minute after the time Papa had indicated. As she turned back toward the waiting Twelve, she heard a tremendous roar rising up over the silent desert hills. Suddenly, a large tube appeared over a hill at the far end of the field, propelled through the sky by a massive growling flame. She could only watch in frozen fascination as Twelve squared off her shoulders, reached a hand toward the sky, stretched forth with her mind and stopped the projectile in mid-air. She guided it to the ground and held it safely just above the dirt until the powerful flame was exhausted. Already in awe over her sister's display of raw power, Eleven was stunned when the tube suddenly erupted in every direction into a billowing explosion. It looked as though it would tear apart everything in its path, but before it could spread, an invisible shield seemed to materialize around the blast and hold it in. It pressed tighter at the sides until the whole explosion compressed to a single, brilliant point of light and was gone. Twelve finally let the twisted remains of the tube fall to the ground.

Eleven stood there astonished; she had never seen anything like it. She couldn't help but be nervous for her sister; was all of that supposed to happen or had she done something wrong? Eleven could remember a time when she had focused to hard on the test Papa wanted her to perform and she had overloaded one of the pieces of equipment used to monitor her brain. Papa had been very angry that day and sent her immediately back to her room. This time, though, Papa looked nothing but pleased by what he had just seen. She looked down once more at her sister, already preparing for the next trial.

Eleven decided she wanted to see this next demonstration up close and shifted her focus down next to her sister in the field. She was startled to discover that Twelve did not appear to be drained at all, already listening intently for the roar of the next missile coming up over the horizon. As it came into view, she once more raised a hand

skyward, directing all her thoughts on to projectile streaking through the sky. While it was the same size as the prior, the soldiers preparing it for launch had configured it with a faster cruise speed; another of Papa's little tests. For a moment she feared she would miss the grab, but she managed to hold on and once more guide it safely down. As before, she threw her whole being into surrounding the blast and holding it in. Up close, Eleven could see the near anguish on her sister's face; she was containing it but only barely. As the flames winked out of existence, Twelve dropped to one knee, panting hard to catch her breath. Two streams of blood dripped from her nose, falling to the ground unnoticed.

"If that was the warmup, what is the real test?" Eleven wondered.

Checking her watch and consulting the schedule, Twelve quickly dug the water and some kind of bar wrapped in foil out of her pack. She drained two large swallows of water as she ripped the foil open. Biting off a chunk of the sticky brown bar inside, she folded over the package and stuffed everything back into the bag.

Deciding to remain down in the field for the first real test, Eleven took a closer look at her sister. She still couldn't get over how much it felt like looking at her own reflection in a mirror, but there were differences. The most obvious was the hair. Twelve kept her hair cut a little shorter than her shoulders and wore it in two tight braids. After years of enduring short buzzed hair, Eleven had refused any significant haircuts, though she had allowed Mrs. Byers to trim the ends a few times to keep everything looking neat. Twelve was more fit and muscular than Eleven, owing principally to a lifetime of better food and physical activity, though Eleven had improved considerably in her time free from captivity. What caught Eleven's attention the most were her eyes. There was a sparkle to them, a liveliness, but behind that, fear. Fear of what, Eleven couldn't tell. Whether it was fear of failing, of punishment, or letting down Papa, it was there, paining her all the same.

As the next missile came up over the hill, Eleven could spot immediately that this one was much different than the first two. To her untrained eyes, it looked twice as large and was painted a deep black; a dark shadow against the clear blue sky. She could almost feel Twelve tense up as she readied her grasp once more. She threw one

hand up to grasp the projectile and knew at once it wouldn't be enough. She raised her other hand, focusing all she had on gaining control. Agonizingly, she brought it down to the ground and steadied herself for what was coming next. She wrapped her mind around the blast, holding it as long as she could, but just like last month, the explosion broke through, tearing apart the desert floor beneath it. Across the distance and through their connection, Eleven was certain she could feel the heat issuing forth from the inferno. Twelve ducked as a chunk of rock went tumbling through the air past her head.

Eleven watched as her sister fell to her knees, drained from exertion. Her heart broke for this girl she so desperately wanted to hate. Curious as to how Papa would react she sent her conscious back to the top of the ridge, where she found him staring furiously down at the girl below, just rising to her feet once more. His hands were clenched, nails biting into his palms. She knew the look well and found her thoughts immediately transported back to the lab. She could remember that same angry face staring back at her through the glass as he ordered his men to drag her away to the dark room.

There was a pause now, to let Twelve regain her strength and focus before tackling another launch. Soon, it was time for the second missile. As before, she grasped it from the sky but failed to get a hold around the accompanying explosion. On the third, she managed to surround the blast and even began to press it in upon itself before she once again lost control. Before the fire even died out, Papa stormed over to the soldier standing near him on the ridge and demanded his radio. He called down to the men preparing the next launch and instructed them to dial back the speed and cut the burn time by several seconds, in hopes that she would have additional strength left over to contain the blast. On the fourth launch, which should have been easier, her exhaustion took a firm hold and she could barely wrestle the projectile to the ground, much less contain the resultant blast. Brenner again demanded they dial back the force of the launch, grumbling that if she couldn't contain a blast of this size, their project was done for.

Eleven pulled back in horror upon hearing that. After reading through all those files, she knew what happened to the experiments that failed Papa too many times. She might be killed or she might

have her brain fried and be turned out into the world, a lost and empty shell. Unable to bear another minute on the ridge, Eleven sent her mind back down to wait by her sister. The transformation that had come over the girl was incredible. She was pale and drained, looking somehow years older than she had an hour before. All spark was gone from her deep brown eyes, now left red and raw by the tears she could no longer hold back. The drops fell freely, carving traces in the dust that covered her face. All Eleven wanted to do was hold this girl, the sister she hadn't even known existed two weeks earlier; the sister she couldn't decide if she loved or hated, perhaps a little of both.

As the roar of the next launch began, Twelve took a final dusty wipe at her eyes and readied herself once more. She ground her feet into the dirt, getting a firm stance. She squared up her shoulders and raised both hands skyward, prepared and waiting long before it came into view. She grabbed with all her might and wrestled it down to the ground and tried to throw her force around it. Eleven could see the panic cross her face as she knew she wouldn't be able to hold it in, even before the blast began. She gritted her teeth, the blood streaming from her nose and ears.

Eleven couldn't stand watching her in such torment and did the only thing she could think of. She didn't know if it would even work, but she stepped over to her sister and laid both hands on her shoulders. Concentrating with all her might, she willed every ounce of her own strength into her sister and through her outstretched arms. For a moment, nothing happened, and then, wondrously, the ball of fire began to shrink. The sisters pushed onward, their shared strength containing the blast until it fizzled away to nothing.

Twelve stood in amazement and stared down at her hands. She had done it. She had thought she was going to fail once more, felt her grip beginning to fail, and suddenly she had felt an amazing burst of strength to get through it. She had actually succeeded. For the first time since the warm up shots, she hazarded a look up to the ridge where Papa stood watching. Across the distance, she could see his smile. She had made him proud again. Her heart swelled as she readied herself for one more blast. She could do it again, she just knew it.

Eleven was worried now. "What have I done?" she asked herself. She had helped her sister get through Papa's test, but what then? Now he would expect her to be able to do it again and probably go even bigger. She knew at once she was going to have to be ready to help again, at least to get her through today. Feeling drained herself, Eleven watched enviously as Twelve unwrapped the last bar in her pack and tore off a large bite. She stood again and squared her stance, the roar of flame already growing in the distance. Eleven took her place right behind her sister and waited. Twelve reached forth and grabbed the missile and started to pull it down. Almost immediately, her grip faltered and the projectile began to break free. Bypassing her sister's shoulders, Eleven reached out and tried to grab the missile directly. Amazingly, she found that it had worked and soon she felt Twelve's own grip regain control of the warhead. Together they lowered it to the ground and wrapped a protective cushion around the blast.

Both girls were utterly spent by the ordeal, and Eleven could feel her connection beginning to fade. As the image began to blur, she watched as Papa rode back down off the ridge and greeted Twelve, telling her just how proud he was of her. He wrapped her into a firm hug and kissed her forehead before helping her back into the car.

Pulling the blindfold off, Eleven looked over at the clock, startled that it already read 4:30. She had spent over seven hours in the In-Between, and had used a tremendous amount of power helping her sister, twice. It far surpassed any amount of time she had spent in that realm previously, even when secretly attending classes to get caught up for starting school. In spite of all that, she didn't feel particularly bad; a little tired perhaps, but not as drained as she would have been even a year before, attempting something like that. Maybe she actually was getting stronger all the time, just like Daddy had said she would.

Remembering him suddenly, she realized he would be home from the station any time now. She ran to her window to ensure that he hadn't come home already, relieved to find only their car in the driveway and his department Blazer still missing. There would have been a lot of explaining to do if he had found her off following Papa through the desert. She wasn't ready to tell him about what she had found;

not until she had a chance to work out her own thoughts about it. Rushing to the bathroom to check her face, she was astonished to find there was very little blood dried under her nose; both nostrils had bled a bit, but nothing from her ears. As she finished washing up and checking that she was presentable, she heard him pull into the driveway.

She walked out onto the front porch to greet him, and was pleased to see he had picked up one of her favorites for dinner; burgers, fries and chocolate shakes. She giggled as he held them up, announcing that he had gotten one of their "let's be fat" dinners. As they sat at the table, grease threatening to drip from their chins, she reached across and grabbed his hand.

"Thank you, again," she said. "For last night. And for not being mad."

Unsure what to say, he gave her a smile and squeezed her hand.

After dinner, Hopper had some paperwork to finish up so he settled in to work on that while Eleven busied herself with a few cleaning chores she was supposed to have been working on the last couple days. Distracted by thoughts of the day, she completely missed getting in touch with Mike at their usual time. Around 8:00, she began to get curious about what Papa and Twelve were up to. Would they have returned to the little white house already or were they still out in the desert? Deciding that a quick peek couldn't hurt, she told Hopper she was feeling gross from the cleaning and how hot it was, so she was going to take a shower before bed. Locked in the bathroom, with the shower providing enough background noise to focus, she sent her mind back out to find them.

Zeroing in on Papa first, she found him in his office in the little white house, writing notes about the day's events in a journal, much like the ones in the box out in the living room. She decided it made sense that he would have started new files for Twelve after having to leave the old ones behind in the lab. After reviewing what he had written, he closed the journal and flipped open an identical looking volume and began writing again, leaning low over the paper as though he were having difficulty reading the things he was putting down. After a few minutes of watching him write, she decided to check on her sister instead. Pulling back and then zooming in once more, she

found her alone at the kitchen table, eating a plate of spaghetti and looking bored and exhausted from the day's trials. Eleven couldn't help but feel sorry for the girl once more. Not only was she eating alone, there was no visible entertainment to occupy her mind or relax with; no magazines, no TV, no music, nothing at all. Eventually, Twelve looked over at the bookshelf and reached out, floating over an old Army field manual and flipping it open to the section on determining safe plants to eat in a survival situation.

Knowing she couldn't stay too long without Daddy getting suspicious, Eleven pulled the blindfold off and got in the shower, relieved that the water had not gone cold while she was off in another dimension. As she scrubbed the day from her skin and out of her hair, her thoughts drifted back to her sister. To read Papa's journals, Twelve was a fierce warrior who could tackle any obstacle and lived a life of affection at his side. Witnessing that life up close, on the other hand, Eleven came to realize that she was still just a little girl afraid of displeasing her Papa and that even living by his side, she was isolated and utterly alone.

That night, her sleep was haunted by dreams once more, though not necessarily nightmares. Her mind was racing around trying to make sense of the last two weeks. Had it really been that short of a time? Two weeks ago she had been eagerly looking forward to her first real summer vacation. Papa had been dead and she had been her mother's only little girl. Now, as June was getting ready to pass its midpoint, her whole world had changed. It had changed on her before, several times in fact, but that didn't make it any easier. She awoke and decided her mouth felt dry, so she went and used the bathroom and got a drink of water. Climbing back into bed and checking the clock, she saw it was almost 11:00. Unable to hold back her curiosity, she pulled on the blindfold one more time to check on her other family.

She found them together again, in what she could only assume was Twelves room. It had bare white walls and a plain wood desk. On a shelf sat a little potted cactus with red flowers and the canvas bundle of knives she had been toying with in the car. Twelve sat in bed, the covers up to her stomach as she sat back against the headboard. Papa sat on the corner of her bed. Once more, he pulled her into a hug and kissed her forehead. Somehow, seeing such affection from Papa at

bedtime stung much worse than it had in the light of day.

"I'm so proud of you, Twelve," he said, looking deep in her eyes. "You did such a great job today. I love you."

"I love you too, Papa" she returned with a huge grin, happy that she had made Papa so proud.

Papa stood and walked toward the door, reaching for the light switch as he got close. Before he could flick the switch, Twelve reached out and pulled the switch down from across the room, with a little giggle. He smiled back at her as he went out and pulled the door shut behind him. Eleven couldn't deal with what she had just seen. A hug was one thing, but actually telling her he loved her? That was something he had never even come close to doing with Eleven, as much as she had wanted to hear that sort of thing from her Papa. She was trying not to cry, refusing to succumb to that once more. Did Papa actually love Twelve? Daddy had said he didn't think so, and Daddy doesn't lie. Was it just something Papa was saying to get her to use her powers better? She thought that must be the answer and felt a little better.

She pushed her mind further and followed Papa down the hall, into his office. Again he sat to work through a stack of documents in folders. It seemed to Eleven that was all he did when he wasn't manipulating his girls into doing what he wanted. He sat for a few minutes, reading sheets of reports and jotting down notes in the margins once more. Without warning, he sighed and set down the report he was reading on his desk, laying the pen he was holding neatly top of it.

He looked up and stared across the room at nothing in particular, saying "It's not nice to spy on your Papa, Eleven."

She ripped the blindfold off and came back to the reality of her bedroom, her heart pounding hard and fast in her chest. How did he know that she was there? Had he known she had been there all day? Was that just something he said when he was alone, on the off chance she had come looking for him, just to get into her head and worry her?

She lay there for a long time just staring into the darkness, worried that she had just made a tremendous mistake. If she had underestimated Papa, had she just put the people that she loved in danger once more? Eventually, exhaustion overtook her and she slept, though fitfully, until dawn brought fresh and cheery light streaming through her window.

12. A Struggle Ensues

A Struggle Ensues

Hawkins, IN

June 12, 1986

Driving to the station, Hopper couldn't shake an impending sense of dread. Eleven had been lost in thought through most of breakfast and had hardly said a word. He hoped she was just trying to process everything she had learned in the last few days. He could understand completely how confusing it must be for her as he was struggling with it all himself. She hadn't seemed particularly upset, just distracted. Desperate to keep her from getting too lost in it all, he had given her a glimpse of a surprise planned for dinner.

"So Mike stopped by the station yesterday," he casually tossed out, as though it were a normal occurrence for him to visit Hopper at work.

As he had hoped, the usual smile his name elicited spread quickly across her face as she looked up, waiting for him to explain why Mike had stopped to see him.

"He asked if he could come over tonight for a little surprise he has been arranging," Hopper said, with some relief that she had taken the bait and was coming back from whatever thoughts were troubling her.

"What surprise?" she asked, hoping he would spill the beans on a few of the details. She had been feeling a little guilty about how little she had talked to him so far this week. She had been so focused on unraveling her past, and that of her sister, that she had missed a couple of their talks and even when they connected, she had said nothing about the journals or reaching out to find Papa and Twelve again. She didn't want to lie to Mike, but she also wasn't sure how much she was ready to share before having a chance to process it herself. She knew he would understand and not be mad, giving her all the time and space she needed to figure things out, and that made

her feel even more guilty. Now, it turned out, while she had been doing all this, he had been planning some kind of special surprise for her.

"Nope," Hopper grinned, enjoying giving her something happy to ponder all day, "like I said, it's a surprise. I wasn't even sure if I should tell you he was coming over, but I figured you'd want to make sure you were ready. The only clue I can tell you is that you might want to take a nap this afternoon; it might be kind of a late night."

"That ought to keep her wheels spinning most of the day," he thought, quite proud of himself.

As he drove through town, Hopper hoped it had been enough to occupy her mind until he could get back to her tonight. He had been quite surprised himself, yesterday afternoon, when Mike had stopped by asking permission and laying out his plan. He would catch a ride over with Hopper at the end of the day and fix her favorite meal, Saturday-morning waffles with bacon, as a special dinner. After sunset, he had a night of stargazing planned with an early summer meteor shower. Just like Sara, Jane had taken a strong interest in the skies above and Mike had confessed he was saving up to surprise her with a telescope for her "real birthday" in August.

As he parked in front of the station, Hopper repeated his silent plea from the day before, "Please don't let her go looking for Brenner."

Sitting on her bed, Eleven was ecstatic, trying to figure out what Mike might have planned for tonight. Now all she had to do was get through the day without something ruining her mood. She knew deep down she was asking for trouble, but she decided to try and figure out just where it was that Papa and Twelve were. She pulled Hopper's United States road atlas off the shelf and flipped to the back to find the state of Washington. Near the middle of the map, she found Yakima, which she had seen on signs near where they pulled off of the highway. From there, she traced her finger back along the main highways that they had taken, back up through the mountains and down through several major cities. Sure enough, at the end of the tracing, she found McChord. According to the map, it was an Air Force base, which explained the enormous planes.

All of this, she filed away in her mind for later. She wasn't ready to share just where they were hiding with anyone else. She was at a loss when it came to her newly found sister. On the one hand, she was enthusiastically striving to please Papa and pass every test he threw at her without question. On the other, it was clear from his journals that Papa had brainwashed her too, doing anything he could to get the results he was looking for.

She knew there was someone she could talk to about all this who would understand. With some apprehension, she pulled on her blindfold and reached out to find Kali. After several minutes, much longer than it usually took, she found her alone in a dusty warehouse.

"Hello, Jane," she greeted, clearly tired and worn down.

"Are you alright? Where is everyone else?" Eleven asked.

"We had a difference of opinions and I took off," she admitted. "They thought we were moving too fast and taking too many risks. I disagreed. If we let up, they will slip through our fingers. So I am going out on my own for now."

She brightened up a little, obviously fine with acting as a lone wolf in her persistent hunt, and changed the subject. "So what brings you around today? It's been awhile."

Eleven was hesitant, but knew that Kali deserved to know whatever she knew. "A lot has happened," she began, hesitatingly, "I found Papa."

Kali sat up straighter, listening intently, though not particularly surprised that her informed hunch had turned out to be correct.

"Where?" she asked.

"He's in hiding," Eleven answered, vaguely, "But there's a lot more. He's continuing his work. He's not alone; he has another experiment with him." She paused, still unsure how to describe her sister. "He has another me."

The surprise crept quickly over Kali's face. She had been worried

Brenner might be trying to continue the project, but had he actually found another subject? "What do you mean, another you?"

"My twin. Mama had two of us," Eleven explained. "Papa kept us apart, raised us different."

"Jane, you have to tell me where they are. He can't be allowed to get away again," Kali repeated.

"It's not that simple," she went on, ignoring Kali's demands. "I've watched her training. She is so strong. She will never let us get close to Papa."

"How can you know that? She might be looking for her moment to escape, just like we did," Kali countered.

"Because I read Papa's journals."

Kali sat stunned at the revelation, "What do you mean? How could you have his journals?"

"When the lab closed, Daddy's friend managed to save Papa's files. I've read my journals, and my sister's. Her name is Twelve. He never told her about me, either. In all his notes, she was the loyal weapon he could never turn me into." Eleven shuddered, recalling the proudly penned memories in his journals, "She killed the cat for him. She did it when she was four."

"Your files were there to," she went on, hoping to lead the conversation away from Papa and Twelve. "I haven't read your journal, I thought you deserved to be able to see it for yourself. But I read about the night you escaped. Were you really trying to get to my room the night you left?"

Kali looked down, saddened at the memories dredged up by such a simple question. "I tried. I knew I couldn't leave my little sister there, knowing what they were doing. It's like I told you the night you found me, I was devastated when they took you away from the rainbow room. I tried for a long time to convince myself you were just somewhere else in the lab, still happy and healthy. Then one day, I saw you. It wasn't supposed to happen, they were always careful

taking us through the halls, timing it so we never saw each other. But I saw Papa carrying you back to your room. You looked so frail, barely conscious, face covered in blood. Your hair was gone and they had stuck you in that flimsy gown. I knew right then I had to get you out."

Kali stopped to catch her breath, tears silently falling at the recollection. Across the distance, alone in her room, Eleven was crying tears of her own. In her darkest moments in the lab, there had been someone who cared, who wanted to get her out, even then.

Kali went on, "I started planning that very night; trying to find a weakness in their schedules. I knew there had to be a time when I could slip out of my room, try to find you, and get us both out of there. But I messed up. The night I tried to go, they found me. I had no idea how far away they had moved you. I'm so sorry I had to run. I knew what they would do if they caught me."

Having read the files, Eleven had a good idea as well what could have happened if Papa and his men had found her.

"I'm so sorry," she repeated.

Eleven wished she could be there, wherever Kali was, to take her in her arms and tell her it was okay. "I understand. You don't have to be sorry. They might have killed you, or worse."

The regretful sorrow on her face slowly dissolved back into a deep and festering rage at everything related to the lab. "Do you understand now, why we have to stop him, once and for all? Do you really want to leave your sister with him? How many more lives does he have to destroy?"

"I know he has to be stopped, but we have to be careful about this. I've watched her, she's not like us. She is going to do everything she can to protect him," Eleven cautioned.

Kali tried to reason with her, "Maybe she could stop one of us, but together, we are stronger than she could possibly be. I could come and get you and we can finish this together. We will never be safe if he is still out there."

"I'm sorry, but I already told you, I can't tell you where they are until we figure this out. I'm not going to risk our lives rushing into this."

Kali's anger took on a new focus, directed straight at Eleven. "Jane, I'm trying to be nice about this. You're going to tell me where..."

"No." Eleven said, so determined it almost came out as a growl.

Resigned to what she had to do, Kali apologized, "I'm sorry Jane. I didn't want to have to do this."

Eleven watched in confusion as Kali balled one hand into a fist and slowly closed her eyes. A moment later, Eleven could feel her there, somewhere deep inside her own mind. It was like hundreds of angry termites chewing their way through her brain, searching for something locked deeply away.

"Get out of my HEAD," she screamed, clasp ing her hands to the sides of her skull. She could feel Kali searching, digging through every corner, trying to find where Papa's location was hidden.

Kali was unmoved, peacefully sitting there while she tore apart Eleven's brain, frantically looking for that one precious memory. Eleven began to panic, trying to force Kali back out of her mind, but it was no use; this wasn't any kind of physical connection she could repel, this was something brand new. Not knowing what else to do, she reached up and ripped the blindfold from her eyes. Her room snapped back into focus before her eyes, and yet, she could still see Kali and the warehouse as well. Worse yet, she could still feel her, deep in her mind. Somehow, she knew Kali was getting close to what she sought.

Eleven called up the memory of McChord and Yakima and tried to throw a barrier around it. She visualized a large, heavy safe, with the locations locked deep inside. She could feel Kali grasp onto the safe as well and start to pry. Eleven fought as hard as she could to hold tight to the memory. As Kali pulled harder at the memory, Eleven's vision began to go black. She gave one last desperate tug, and she felt her grip on the memory slip away into Kali's eager grasp. The last thing she remembered was the sound of a loud SNAP ringing in her ears, and everything went black.

Hours later, Hopper pulled his Blazer into the driveway and an eager Mike jumped out and gathered the bag of supplies he had brought for the evening. He had a batch of chocolate chip cookies he had baked that afternoon. He had a big wool blanket to lay out in the grass for stargazing, and another to throw over them against the chill. Hopper had eyed the blankets with fatherly suspicion but decided to give him a pass on the usual harsh scrutiny for the evening. He had promised Mike that, while he could and would be checking on them at ANY time, he wouldn't be standing on the deck glaring at them all night.

They walked in and headed to the kitchen to start getting things ready for dinner.

"Jane, we're home," Hopper called, a little surprised that she hadn't been on the front porch waiting to pounce on Mike the second they pulled up. Turning to Mike, he hazarded a guess. "I had told her she should rest up this afternoon, she's probably still asleep. Why don't you go wake her up, I'm sure she'd rather see your face than mine when she wakes up," he teased.

Mike grinned at the thought, and took off through the living room and down the hall toward her room. Hopper set about pulling out the waffle iron and putting a big pan on the stove for bacon. He was just reaching into the fridge to pull out the pack of bacon when he heard Mike scream down the hall in utter panic.

"Hopper!"

13. Please Wake Up

Please Wake Up

Hawkins, IN

June 12, 1986

Hopper's blood froze in his veins as Mike's panicked scream rang in his ears. He dropped the bacon and took off in a sprint down the hall. Instinctively, his right hand snapped the top strap off his holster as he ran; whatever had set Mike off could only be bad. Even still, nothing could prepare him for what he saw when he reached her doorway. She lay sprawled back on the bed, her blindfold hanging loose around her neck. Dried trails of blood ran from her nose down to where they had puddled on the bed below her neck. Mike held one of her hands in his own, as he gently shook her shoulder with the other.

Tears had already begun to fall as he pleaded with her to wake. "El!? Can you hear me? El? Please, you've gotta wake up!"

Rushing to her side, Hopper began shaking her in earnest and found that he too could not get her to wake. He leaned close and was relieved to find that she was still breathing. He had always been afraid this day would come. Even though she was no longer a secret and had been out of hiding for close to a year, he was still terrified at the prospect of taking her to the hospital. He told himself it was a fear of their secrets unraveling and her past being discovered. Deep down, he was afraid of losing her, just as he lost Sara when he brought her to another hospital years before. Still there was nothing to be done.

Turning to Mike, he gave a few quick instructions, "Get my keys off the kitchen counter, they're by the phone. Go unlock the Blazer and get the back door open. Get in the backseat and leave the keys on the driver's seat."

Hopper's commanding voice stirred Mike into immediate action and he took off to do as he was told. Hopper gently pulled the blindfold

off over her head and tossed it aside, knowing there would be enough questions at the hospital without that complication. He scooped her into his arms and carried her out to the truck, pulling the front door shut behind him as he went out. Mike was in the back seat waiting as he ran up and passed her limp form in.

"Get a belt around her. And you too," he said as he slammed the door shut and ran around to the driver's side.

Mike secured one of the lap belts as best he could around her middle before strapping himself in. Her head in his lap, he put a protective arm around her as Hopper whipped the Blazer around in a spray of gravel and took off toward the county hospital. It was a drive that should normally take at least 20 minutes, but Hopper managed the trip in just over 10 thanks to the Blazer's lights and siren as well as a heavy foot on the gas. The whole drive, Mike kept a firm grip around Eleven, holding her in place as they swung hard around corners. With his free hand, he gently stroked her hair and whispered reassurances to her, fighting to keep the paralyzing fear out of his voice; he had to be strong for her.

"Just hold on. We're almost there. The doctors will know what to do," he whispered close to her ear, a single tear splashing off her cheek.

Hopper threw the Blazer into park outside the entrance to the emergency room and dashed around to the back seat. As Hopper circled the truck, Mike unstrapped the belt from around her. Scoping her in his arms, Hopper burst through the door, yelling for help as he went. Mike followed close behind, not wanting to let her out of his sight. Immediately, someone wheeled a gurney out and Hopper laid her out on the bed. They were quickly whisked through a pair of swinging doors and back toward a triage room, a nurse and doctor assessing her condition and hurling a thousand questions at Hopper as they went. How long has she been unconscious? Did she hit her head? Has she been drinking or taken any drugs? Does she have any allergies?

Mike made a move to follow, but felt a strong pair of hands on his shoulders, holding him back.

"You'll have to wait out here," said another nurse, keeping her grip

firm until she was sure Mike wouldn't make a run for the doors.

With an agonizing hole tearing through his heart, Mike watched her being wheeled down the hall and around the corner as the doors finished swinging shut. His only consolation was the knowledge the Hopper was still with her, and she was in the capable hands of the doctors now. Looking around in a daze, he caught the gaze of a few others in the waiting room, already turning their attention back to magazines and admission forms, the excitement dying down once more. The flashing lights of the Blazer caught his eye, and he realized the truck was blocking most of the entrance where Hopper had left it. Not knowing what else to do, Mike walked out and slammed the back door shut. Walking around to the drivers door, he slide in behind the wheel. Nancy had let him try driving in a parking lot a couple times, so he knew enough of what he needed to do. After looking around and figuring out the right switch to turn off the flashing lights, he started up the engine and drove through the lot until he found a proper parking space.

Locking the Blazer and pocketing the keys, he walked back into the waiting room and quickly looked around for any sign that Hopper had come back out. Not finding him, Mike settled into a chair to wait. He picked a seat directly in line with the doors that separated waiting family from the treatment rooms, so he could watch in hopeful anticipation whenever someone went through the doors. As the clock dragged ceaselessly on, Mike found himself lost in silent prayer.

"Please God, if you're out there, please bring her back to me. I can't lose her again."

Eventually, an exhausted Hopper pushed his way through the doors and out into the waiting room. Mike was immediately on his feet and moving toward the man, who looked drained and on the verge of collapse.

"Is she okay?" Mike asked hopefully, terrified of the answer that might come. Hopper stumbled forward and collapsed into a chair. Mike sat down next to him, never taking his eyes off Hopper's face, waiting for a response and trying to gauge his expression.

"They don't know yet," he finally responded, doing his level best to hold it together. "She's still out. They're running a bunch of tests to try and figure out what happened. She stopped breathing at one point, but was able to start again on her own. They're putting her on a ventilator just to be safe, so they had to kick me out of the room."

At that, Hopper dropped his face into his hands and began to sob. Sara's funeral had been the last time he had allowed people to see him shed tears like this, but the prospect of losing his little girl again was too much and all the fear he had held bottled up came pouring out. Not knowing what else to do, Mike put an arm around Hopper's shoulders as his own tears returned. Mike knew Hopper would never, under normal circumstances, let his guard down like this; not around him. Eventually, tears spent, Mike pulled his arm back and they lapsed into a contemplative silence. At one point, Hopper patted at his pockets and looked toward the entrance in a panic.

Sensing his apprehension, Mike reached into his pocket and fished out the keys, handing them over. "I parked it in a regular spot out in the lot."

Hopper looked at the keys in surprise, before shoving them in his own pocket. "Thanks."

They lapsed again into silence, lost in their own thoughts, worried for the girl they loved. Eventually, around midnight, the doctor came to retrieve them. They both stood in eager anticipation as he walked over to update them on her condition. As he led them across the lobby and over to an elevator, he gave them a rundown on everything they had learned so far.

"She's stable right now and breathing on her own, though she did stop again for a short time about an hour ago. We're leaving the ventilator in as a precaution in case she stops again. She has strong brain activity, enough in fact that it's more like she is deep in a dream rather than fully comatose. What this means is, I don't think we are looking at any kind of brain damage."

"So what happened then? If everything looks normal, why can't she wake up," Hopper asked, desperate for an explanation.

"Well, that's the thing. There's no sign of injury, no sign of drugs or alcohol in her system, all the scans we've run have come back spotless. We have a specialist who will be here tomorrow morning and we have slated her for a more advanced scan, so hopefully we will have some better answers then. For now, she's resting, she's not displaying any signs of pain, she is just simply," he hesitated, searching for the right word, "switched off."

Mike stood in silence, trying to absorb everything the doctor was saying. He had a strong suspicion that whatever had happened to Eleven, it was something beyond the hospital's ability to fix. He hoped with every ounce of strength he had left that she could find a way to bring herself out of it.

As the trio stepped off the elevator, the doctor ushered them toward the waiting area near her room. Turning to address Hopper, he went on. "We have her settled in a room. You can go in and see her. Because it's the middle of the night, immediate family only," he said, eyeing Mike.

"He's family," Hopper said without missing a beat, daring the doctor to question him.

"Alright, you can both head in then," he said quickly, as he turned to head back down the hall to the elevators and return to the safety of the emergency room.

The pair walked slowly into the room, preparing themselves for the sight waiting for them. As she came into view beyond the half-drawn curtain, Hopper pulled up short, almost stumbling backward into Mike. He had known what he would see; he had been preparing himself for hours. She was there, laid out neatly on the bed, blankets tucked delicately around her. Her head lay gently on a pillow, hair softly framing her face. She looked like she could be lost in a peaceful afternoon nap. His eyes saw none of that, drawn instead to the plastic tube of the ventilator running carefully out of the corner of her mouth.

Instantly he was drawn backward through time to a nearly identical scene. Another hospital, another room, another little girl, another machine doing her breathing as she barely clung to life. He had sat

there helpless, unable to save her. He had spent months praying, night after night, for God to take him instead; to spare her small, innocent life. Day after day he had sat by her side, trying to put on a brave face for his little girl, willing every ounce of strength he had into her. Day after day, he watched the cancer slowly tear the life away from her until the day she had no fight left. He built a wall around his heart that day, fleeing from any attachment that could destroy his soul like that again.

Yet, here he stood, staring at his little girl. A new hospital, a new room, a new girl, a new malady threatening to tear him apart once more. He hadn't meant to love her, to let anyone that deep into his heart again. He had only meant to find her peace and safety. Instead, somewhere in those months, secluded away in the cabin, in a torrent of arguments and Eggos, he had torn down the wall and let her in. She was his whole world, in every possible, wonderful way, and he was paralyzed at the prospect that he could lose her.

Mike stepped to the side to take in the sight that had frozen Hopper in front of him. Her face had been gently cleaned of the blood and her hair was neatly framing her face. She looked so peaceful, so beautiful lying there, almost angelic. He knew, under that peaceful facade, the girl he loved more than anything in the world, the girl he had vowed to do anything to protect, was in terrible danger. It had only taken a single glance at the blindfold and the trail of blood to know she had gone searching in the In-Between and something had gone horribly wrong. Now she was stuck somewhere and Mike cursed the fact that once again he was powerless to help her.

Turning to look at Hopper, Mike realized the man was still frozen, staring in panic at the breathing tube snaking out of the corner of her mouth. Eleven had told him about Hopper's daughter, Sara, though not a lot; she had developed a better understanding about certain things being private and how keeping quiet doesn't make them a lie.

Hesitantly, unsure how he would react, but needing to do something to reassure him, Mike laid a hand on his shoulder, "She's going to be okay, Hopper. This isn't like with Sara." As soon as the words slipped out, Mike was certain he had crossed a line.

Furious, Hopper spun around to face him. "Who the hell is this punk

to bring her up?" he thought. "What the hell does he know about anything?"

Looking at the genuine concern on Mike's face, he softened again and took a deep breath before speaking, "I know kid." Needing a minute to come to grips with everything, Hopper continued, softer still, "Look, I'm running on empty here. Could you go check in the waiting room and see if there is still any coffee left? I could really use a cup."

"Sure," Mike said, relieved he hadn't just taken a fist to the chin, or worse, been banned from the room. "I'll go see what I can find." At that, he turned and left the room, realizing Hopper needed some time to convince himself that his daughter wasn't dying before his eyes.

Grabbing the back of one of the visitor chairs, Hopper drug the seat over next to her bed and fell into it. Taking one of her hands in his own, he whispered a plea, fighting back the tears that begged to free themselves once more.

"Wherever you are, lost in that head of yours, you need to come back. Please come back. I can't lose you again." He raised her hand to his lips, giving her fingers a gentle kiss. "I love you, Jane. Please don't leave me."

It took Mike ten minutes to finally locate a coffee pot that wasn't empty or so boiled down that the remains were nothing but a thick black paste. Eventually, on another floor, he found a fresh pot in another waiting room where a nervous family sat in silence, waiting while their loved one was in emergency surgery. Filling two cups as high as he dared, he turned and made his way back up to Eleven's room. He wasn't a huge fan of coffee, but he also wasn't about to let exhaustion drag him away from her side tonight. Arriving back at the room, he found Hopper sitting in silence, gently holding her hand. He passed one cup over to him, before pulling another chair up along the other side of her bed. He reached out and took hold of her other hand.

Taking a sip, Hopper raised the cup toward Mike, saying "Thanks kid. I needed that."

Mike took both meanings behind his words and nodded. Neither

spoke another word that night, each lost in their own personal hell of doubt and worry. Together they sat in the dim light, protectively flanking the girl who meant more to them than life itself. Holding gently to her hands they remained there, refusing to leave her side for even a moment until the first pink rays of dawn poured in through her window and dazzled golden off her hair.

14. Lost in the Dark

Lost in the Dark

Somewhere Else

Time Unknown

Eleven's eyes snapped open and she found herself surrounded by darkness. She tried to look around, and found nothing but complete and total blackness in every direction. It came to her suddenly that she must be in the In-Between, though she couldn't for the life of her remember sending her mind there. She tried hard to think of what she had been doing, and who she might be looking for, but nothing came to her. She turned again, looking for a glimmer of light anywhere that might give her a clue as to what was happening. Worried something was wrong with her eyes, she held her hands up and was relieved to find that, despite the infinite dark around her, she could very clearly see her own arms. She began to walk, hoping something might come into view. Realizing immediately that something was wrong, she stopped again.

"Everything is wrong," she thought, with a rising panic.

The In-Between had always felt solid beneath her feet as she walked, and it had that shimmering water that splashed around her toes. Here, there was no water and nothing to be felt beneath her feet. She tried stomping one foot to feel the ground, and her foot simply went down until her leg was out straight. There was no ground beneath her feet, and yet she knew she wasn't falling. She didn't feel like she was floating, either; not like in the bath. She tried putting her foot down one more time and felt that she was standing firm again, despite there being nothing solid below her.

"Where am I?" she asked herself. She knew she wasn't in the Upside-Down, nor the Rightside-Up, and this certainly didn't feel like the In-Between. She was somewhere else. She began to panic before remembering the blindfold. "Wherever I am, I had to have brought myself here," she thought as she reached up to pull the cover from

her eyes and found nothing was there. Her arms - her real arms - felt heavy and still. Try as she might, she couldn't get them to move at all.

"Stay calm," she told herself, "You've gone somewhere and you just have to go back the way you came." The problem was, she had no idea how she had come here. She tried to think. What had she been doing today? What was today? The harder she tried to remember, the further the answers felt like they were slipping away. She was beginning to panic as nothing familiar came to her. By instinct, she twisted a finger in the blue band around her wrist, though she couldn't seem to recall why she would be doing it. Her mind was turning to a haze, like looking out the window on a cold, foggy morning. She thought hard, trying to pull up the last thing she could remember doing. Fragments of words, flashes of obscured faces, nothing would come to her.

Mike!

His name came flashing out of the void around her. Just as suddenly, it was trying to flee once more.

"No!" she thought stubbornly, refusing to let the name slip away. She pulled hard against the memory, trying to bring forward every detail she could remember about him. Mike. The boy who found her cold and scared, lost in the rain. The boy who brought her into his home, gave her clothes, built her the blanket fort. The boy who kept her safe and hidden and brought her Eggos. The one who held her as she cried, tearfully revealing her darkest secrets: that she had opened the gate and released the demogorgon. The one who refused to let her blame herself or think of herself as a monster.

With each detail, every thread, she began to feel a calm wash over her. She gathered every thought she could about the name. Mike. The brave boy who stood between her and the bad men when she was too weak to fight, ready to defend her life with his own. The boy who stood vigil for 353 days, desperately reaching out for her each night, refusing to believe she was gone when others had given up hope. The boy who helped her take her first tentative steps into the real world and was there to catch her when life made her stumble.

All this and more flooded through her mind and his face blazed clear. She shut her eyes and tried to pull herself toward him as she had hundreds of times before. It had become like breathing to her - effortless - and she could find him anywhere. She opened her eyes, ready to see his pale, freckled face and those deep brown eyes. Instead, once again, she saw only blackness. She tried again, with the same heartbreaking result.

Between the effort of pulling forth his memory, and trying to reach out and find him, Eleven began to feel drained and exhausted. She tucked her knees into her chest and rolled to one side, perceiving herself now lying down, though she had not changed position at all. Her eyelids felt heavy and a comforting warmth surrounded her like a thick blanket.

"I'll just close my eyes for a minute," she told herself, "then I'll try to find him again."

She drifted off sleep with the image of Mike's face held tight in her mind's grasp; she wasn't going to let him go again.

Hawkins, IN

June 13, 1986

Morning failed to bring any better news about Eleven's condition. Several nurses came to collect her just before 8:00 and wheeled her bed away for another round to tests. They warned Mike and Hopper it would likely be a couple hours before she was back and settled, suggesting that the cafeteria was open for breakfast. Deciding they were both starved after skipping dinner the night before, they took the elevator down in silence, still lost in thought. After picking a few things that looked good, they grabbed a table and settled in to eat. It quickly became obvious that neither was very hungry after all, too lost in worry, and mostly they just poked at their meals.

Hopper stared across the table, pondering the boy tracing lines with a fork through his scrambled eggs, too upset to contemplate eating them. It had occurred to him many times that he had a unique relationship with Mike Wheeler, far beyond what he would normally have expected between a father and his daughter's boyfriend. He had

come to realize Mike was devoted mind, body and soul to Jane. He had been there for her in every way he possibly could, to protect her. He had stood up to armed guards with rifles drawn and aimed squarely at his chest and bravely declared they would have to go through him to get to her. He almost laughed, remembering the night Mike finally found out she was alive and safe. After the initial overwhelming joy at seeing her, he had fallen into a rage, directed squarely at Hopper, upon the discovery he had been hiding her and hadn't told him. Hopper had been shocked when Mike threw several angry punches his way, and had taken them willingly, knowing the boy was right and that he probably deserved them. Mike Wheeler was probably the only person on earth who could get away with that, but only the one time.

"Do you want to call people, or should I?" Mike asked, pulling Hopper back to reality.

"What?" he asked, trying to put together who Mike meant. As far as he was concerned, everyone Jane needed was right here already.

"The guys, and Max, I'm sure they'll want to know so they can come by," he explained. "And Mrs. Byers of course. You know she'll kill you if she finds out about this from someone else."

Hopper let out a sigh, "Yeah, I guess we should give them all a call. Good thinking. Do you mind doing it?"

"No, I don't mind. I'm done anyway, not really that hungry."

"Yeah, I know what you mean," Hopper replied, a sad, half smirk on his face. "I think I'm going to head back up to her room to wait."

"Okay, I'll see you up there in a little bit," he said, picking up the half-full styrofoam cup of coffee he was working on, and headed off in search of a phone.

After clearing their trays, Hopper started back toward the elevators but then paused next to one of the doors leading out to the parking lot. At Jane's insistence, he had quit smoking about six months ago. She had never liked the smell, and then her first semester of school had included a health class. She had come home and proudly recited

everything dangerous he was doing to himself with cigarettes. So he had quit. For her. Today, he felt the strongest craving for one since that first week quitting cold-turkey. He knew there was a half pack and a lighter out in the Blazer, tucked away in the glove box. He hadn't meant to keep them, and only found them by chance when he was cleaning out the backseat a few months ago. He had hung onto them more as a test of willpower than as a fallback, but now he felt as though they were calling to him. He wasn't sure how long he stood at the door, staring out into the parking lot, but eventually Hopper pulled himself back and turned toward the elevators. He had quit for her, and he wasn't about to start up again when she needed him to be there for her more than ever.

Back in her room, Hopper settled into his chair and dropped his hat down over his eyes. He leaned back, intending to rest for a few minutes before the doctors brought her back and the next round of news would be delivered. A few minutes later, Mike returned, settling into his own chair.

"That was fast," Hopper said, not bothering to raise his hat to look at him.

"I called Mrs. Byers first," Mike explained. "She said she would handle calling everyone else. She's also going to coordinate people coming by so everyone's not here at once."

"How'd she take the news?" Hopper asked, knowing Joyce had begun to think of Jane like her own daughter as well.

"I think she was ready to jump in the car and run every red light to get over here." Mike said, smiling at the thought that she probably could have made better time than Hopper getting to the hospital last night. "I think she is going to have a few choice words for you when she gets here, for not calling her the second we got here."

At that, Hopper couldn't help himself and let out a single, sharp laugh. "I bet she will," he replied. "And she's probably right, but it never even crossed my mind."

"Yeah, me neither," Mike consoled. "It didn't hit me until breakfast." He thought for a minute and then teased, "You probably have a little

time to think up an apology. I warned her they are running tests right now, so it will be a while before she is back in the room."

Hopper raised a corner of his hat and eye'd Mike across the room. "Thanks for calling her kid. I appreciate it."

Somewhere Else

Time Unknown

Eleven's eyes flickered open once more and she was greeted again by the same unending blackness. The confusion of that first waking was replaced by a resigned sigh at the realization she was still here. Wherever here was. This time, mercifully, she could at least remember a little more. She recalled her struggle to pull forth Mike's memory, and her inability to find him. She could remember laying down, or at least imagining laying down, and closing her eyes to rest. So perhaps that was a progress of sorts. She tried once more to reach out and locate Mike, straining her mind to find him wherever he might be; she could feel so strongly that he was nearby, but he still seemed to remain out of reach. She searched her memory to see if anything or anyone new had shown up there.

Hopper, no that wasn't quite right, Daddy!

She pulled him out of the foggy mist. Scruffy beard, tired, worried eyes and his favorite hat. As she recalled all she could about him, she was startled to find there was more pain and confusion than there had been with Mike. His memories initially came forth with lies and broken promises, but also love and caring. While he had gone about things all wrong in the beginning, his lies and overprotectiveness had all been in a noble but misguided attempt to keep her safe. There had been fights, including several big ones where she had thought about leaving the cabin and running away and one difficult time where she was certain he would send her away. She called forth more memories and was relieved to recall how much better things had turned. They had grown to understand each other and in him, she had found a real father who loved her more than anything in the world.

She clung to his memory and tried to reach out to find him. Once again, he felt so close and yet remained out of reach. The panic

started to creep in again and she found herself clinging to the hairband around her wrist. Sara! Sara's hairband. Daddy had given her Sara's hairband to give her strength when she didn't have enough of her own. She smiled as she twisted and untwisted the band, its healing strength filling her, even as the exhaustion began to take hold. She curled up again, staring off in the distance.

As her eyes slowly closed, she thought she saw a dim, gray light taking shape. Before she could focus or try to figure out what it was, sleep overtook her.

15. Never Again

Never Again

Hawkins, IN

June 15, 1986

The next few days passed in a slow blur. Eleven had been brought back to the room after her tests, and the doctors had been just as stumped as they had been that first night. They could not find a single thing wrong with her physically. The only anomaly they had noted were the two separate nose bleeds she had experienced during the tests. However, even these were minor and stopped quickly on their own. Hopper had very quickly explained them away, noting that she got them frequently due to spring pollen allergies and had for years.

Mike and Hopper pretty much lived by her side, never leaving for longer than it took to use the bathroom and fetch fresh coffee or a sandwich from downstairs. Even then, they took turns leaving so that she was never there alone. Neither could stomach the thought of her waking up alone and scared in a room which, according to Hopper, looked uncomfortably similar to her room back in the lab. Thankfully, a steady stream of well-wishers had filled every spare surface with flowers and cards and one very large pink bear, compliments of Dustin.

Joyce had been the first to come, bringing Will along. While she had been ready to demand an explanation as to why nobody had called her that first night, it only took one look at Hopper to wash all that away. He looked lost and barely holding it together. Of course she knew all about Sara, and knew this must feel like history repeating itself. Jonathan and Nancy had come next and offered their sympathy and concern. The whole Sinclair family had come, bringing Max with them. Even Erica had made a card of her own for Eleven, insisting that it get hung high on the wall so she would see it when she woke up. Steve drove Dustin and his mom over and they passed along the expected sympathies as well. By the end of that first day, Mike was

ready to snap if anyone else asked if there was anything they could do. He could tell Hopper was beginning to feel the same.

By Sunday afternoon, the visitors had stopped, and it was now just Joyce coming around breakfast and dinner time. Sometimes she brought Will, and sometimes came by herself. Flo had brought a bouquet and a card signed by everyone from the station. They had all come to love Hopper's daughter when he shocked them all with the news last year too. Hopper couldn't help but notice, as he took stock of everyone who had stopped by, the Mike's parents had been conspicuously absent. Sure, Mike had been there the whole time, and Nancy had come by, but it was more than a little strange that his parents hadn't come once.

When Joyce came by just before dinner on Sunday, Hopper shocked Mike with the news that he was going to be leaving the hospital for a little while.

"Since there's no way in hell I'm going in to work tomorrow," he explained, "I need to run the Blazer over to the station. Joyce is going to give me a lift back to the house so I can bring my own car back here." He paused, before continuing, "You're going to stay here with her, right? You're not going anywhere?" His tone wasn't accusatory, as though Mike might suddenly decide to wander off, but rather genuinely fearful that she might wake up alone.

"Don't worry, I'll be right here. I'm not going anywhere," he reassured. "Give me five minutes to stretch my legs, hit the bathroom and grab more coffee and I won't be leaving her side for hours."

"Thanks," he said, relieved. "Take ten. I'm probably going grab a shower and some fresh clothes while I'm at the house."

"Sure, no problem," Mike said. The bathroom in Eleven's hospital room had a shower, which Mike had used that morning, thanks to Nancy bringing him a change of clothes the previous afternoon. Hopper hadn't bothered, having nothing clean to change into, and he was beginning to feel gritty and stiff from days parked in a chair.

Half an hour later, Hopper was relieved to find himself standing under cascades of hot water, rinsing the grim of the last three days

down the drain. He had left instructions with Mike to call him if there was any change at all, though he knew in his heart that nothing was likely to happen in his absence. As he let the water work the tension out of his back, he suddenly found himself sobbing once more, his thoughts a swirl of both his daughters and the terror of them sharing the same fate. It had been terrible receiving the cancer diagnosis with Sara, but it had also been a solid diagnosis that came complete with a treatment plan. Somehow, this felt even worse, with the doctors completely stumped at what was even wrong. He found himself coming back again and again to the same horrible fear that he was going to lose her too.

As it had so many times in the last few days, this thought led him back to the other time he was certain was going to lose her. It had been late November, a year and a half earlier. It had been a couple weeks since she had closed the gate for good, and life had begun to return to a new normalcy. The windows had been fixed in the cabin and life was put back into order. Begrudgingly, he had allowed Mike to come over one afternoon, with the promise of more visits as long as they worked out proper precautions to stay safe. For a while, Jane finally seemed genuinely happy. Then one fateful Saturday, she wasn't.

She had been quiet all afternoon and through dinner, clearly deep in thought. He knew better than to push for an explanation; he was quickly learning she would come to him when she was ready. Finally, after dinner, she had come over and sat next to him on the couch, eyes downcast, and blurted out, "Friends don't lie."

He looked at her puzzled, wondering what promise he had broken this time, when she continued, "I need to tell you what happened when I left. All of it."

He was taken aback that she wanted to volunteer the story. It had been in the back of his mind that he needed to find out at some point, but he had been cowardly avoiding it, reveling in the peace that had come into their lives.

"Okay, let's hear it," he said, putting down the newspaper and turning to face her, giving his full attention.

"I found the box from the lab, with Mama's file, when I was cleaning up the glass." she began. This much of the story he had guessed at straight away, as soon as they got back to the cabin that first night. After settling her into bed, he had gone back out to the living room and found the box and files among all the other disarray.

She went on to explain the full story. After finding the picture, she had reached out and found her Mama in the In-Between and in a rebellious anger, had decided to go to her. She had put a few things in her bag and taken off on foot. Once she got out to the main road, she had stuck her thumb out to hitchhike, just like she had seen on TV shows a few times. The nice man in the big truck had picked her up and given her a ride to Mama's house. So far, this matched up with the story she had told him on the drive to close the gate. He sat in nervous anticipation, knowing there was still a day and a half between the nice man in the truck and her showing up at the Byers' house with a punk makeover.

"At Mama's, I was able to find her again in the In-Between, and she showed me the few things she could still remember, on a loop in her mind. Me being born, Papa taking me away, her trying to get me back, finding me in the lab, Papa breaking her mind with electricity. She also showed me another girl from the lab, like me. She wanted me to find her."

She went on, explaining how she found Kali's picture in Mama's files, and located her in Chicago. After discovering that Aunt Becky was calling people and telling them she was there, she had stolen the money out of Becky's purse, walked to the bus station and bought a ticket to Chicago to find the girl she was now calling her sister. Hopper sat there, doing his best to hold back his anger, trying to give her the chance to lay out her story in full.

"I know taking the money was wrong. And I know going to Chicago was really wrong. I'm sorry that I even left; I know I shouldn't have done that," she went on. She could see he was fighting to keep his anger in check, and was scared to continue, but knew that she had to. Keeping everything that had happened a secret was starting to make her tummy hurt all the time.

"This next part is bad. I'm so sorry," she apologized.

Without pausing, she spilled the rest of what happened up until the point she came back, sparing no detail. Letting the photo guide her across the city until she found Kali and her friends in the abandoned warehouse. Standing up to the man with the knife. Meeting Kali, hearing Hopper when he tried to call her on the radio at the cabin, testing her power by dragging the train car. She described learning what Kali's gang did, tracking down the bad men from the lab. How she found Ray, the man who hurt Mama and Kali before she escaped. How they went to find him. How they robbed the convenience store on the way there.

Hopper had started to say something, when she cut him off, "Please, let me say it all first."

She described getting to Ray's apartment, how they broke in, threw him against the wall. How she had tried to strangle him in her rage. How it was only seeing a picture of him with his kids that she had stopped, and also stopped Kali from shooting him. How they fled, barely escaping the police. How the police found them back at the warehouse and once again, she barely made it out while they were being shot at.

By the end of her explanation, she was in tears, sobbing out her apology, "I'm so sorry. I know it was bad and I promise I'll never do anything like that again." Then, after a pause, looking up at his angry face, she choked out "Please don't make me go away. I promise I'll be good, just please don't make me go away."

He had been ready to lay into her right then about how horrible everything she had done was, but that final desperate plea tore his heart apart. He pulled her into a reassuring half hug. "I'll never send you away. But I need to think about what you've told me. For now, I need you to go to bed and we can talk about this in the morning."

She had nodded, eyes downcast, and walked quietly into her room and softly shut the door. After a long night of restless tossing and thinking, he had decided how he wanted to handle it. The next morning, when she cautiously poked her head out of her room, she found him sitting at the kitchen table with a plate of Eggos and sausage placed at her seat. As she sat down, she had nervously raised her eyes to gauge just how much trouble she would be in.

"Alright," he began. "So you understand that pretty much everything you told me last night was bad, right? Things you should never do? Yeah?"

"Yes," she said softly, hesitating.

"Running away, hitchhiking, stealing money, robbing a store, trying to kill a man," he said, counting off the misdeeds, raising a finger on his left hand for each one. "Coming back home and saving the world." he continued, folding all five fingers back down. "I think you've earned a pass, just this once. No one got hurt too badly, you're sorry for the things you did and you know not to do them again."

She looked up, a nervous smile beginning to form. "Not grounded?" she asked, hopefully.

He smiled, "Not this time." Then, getting serious again for just a moment, "But if you EVER do anything like that again, you will be VERY grounded."

She smiled fully then and dug into breakfast, the pit in her stomach gone. He sat back, taking a sip of his coffee. He had another reason for being lenient; something he needed to confess as well, though it took him another two days to work up the courage to tell her.

After dinner, they had sat on the couch, and he began, just as she had, "Friends don't lie. I have something I need to tell you too."

Not sure what it could be, she turned to look at him.

"I need to tell you about what happened the night you found Will. I did something that night I'm not proud of and it's been eating me up ever since."

She was shocked at what it might be. She knew he and Mrs. Byers had gone into the Upside-Down and found Will, tracking him from his fort in the woods to the library where the demogorgon had put him.

"After you found where Will was, I knew we had to go into the Upside-Down to get him, and the only way I knew to get in was through the lab, through the opening by the bath. When Joyce and I

went there, I had hoped we could make it downstairs on our own, the same way I had a few days before. But the guards caught us. I had to make a deal with Brenner to get down there."

With a sickening horror, she began to see where his confession was headed.

Tears beginning to form in his eyes, he went on. "El, I'm so sorry. We had to save Will. We had to get through the gate and to do that, we had to give Brenner what he wanted." He paused, working up the courage to say what needed to be said. "I told him where to find you. I'm so sorry, El," he sobbed. "I thought, once we had Will safe, we would be able to find a way to get you back out of there and get you someplace safe. I never thought anything like that would happen at the school. If I had known..." He let that thought trail off. "I'm so sorry."

He reached out to take one of her hands in his own, but she quickly pulled back in a confused mix of fear and disgust. Her head was lost in a barrage of competing thoughts. She had often wondered how Papa had found her that night but never imagined one of the people she trusted had given her up to him. Now it turned out that Hopper, one of only two people in the whole world she thought she could trust, who she had relied on for nearly everything for the last year, had betrayed her. He had been ready to ship her back to life in the lab. She knew in her heart if Papa had gotten her back into the lab, no-one would have ever been able to get her back out and even Hopper had to know that. And he still did it anyway. Without his betrayal, they could have figured out a plan, some way to keep her hidden and safe, but he took that chance away. He had told the bad men exactly where to find her and put her friends in danger; had put Mike in danger. He was the reason she had kill the bad men, to try and protect the people she cared about. He was the reason the demogorgon came, and she had to drag herself into the Upside-Down to destroy it. Because of him, she had to hide out in the woods, almost freeze in the snow and practically starve. She thought back to the food he had been leaving for her in the box in the woods and was sickened. Had he been trying to help her, or was he just trying to alleviate his own guilt?

Hopper watched her face for some sign of what she was thinking, and

got back only confusion and anger; she wouldn't make eye contact with him. Without saying a word, she stood and walked into her room, slamming the door behind her. She looked around her room at the things he had given her, suddenly feeling like everything she saw was a lie. The bear he had given her to help with her nightmares. The book he read to her on the nights she couldn't sleep, for fear the bad men would find her again. She grabbed them both and turned, swinging the door open from across the room with a single angry look. He looked up, still sitting on the couch, clearly still crying. She threw the bear at him first, then the book. It was then that she saw the blue band on her wrist; Sara's hairband. He had given it to her the day after she closed the gate, telling her how it had been his strength and now he wanted her to have it. She ripped it from her wrist and flung that at him as well, slamming the door once more.

She laid on the bed then, pulling the blankets around her like a protective shell and began to cry. Part of her wanted to grab her coat and march right out the front door; there was nothing he could do to stop her. She could walk to Mike's. He was all she had now, the only person she could trust. She also knew she couldn't put him in danger like that, assuming Hopper hadn't also been lying about the bad men still looking for her. Somewhere in the darkness of night, sleep finally overtook her. The next morning, she didn't bother emerging for breakfast. Hopper gently knocked at her door, and getting no response, tried the doorknob. His hand met the familiar resistance of her holding the other side with her mind, so he knew at least she was still there.

The next nine days were an utter hell for him, though he was certain he deserved all of it. For nine days, she didn't speak a single word to him. She stayed in her room until he was gone in the morning. Each day, as he drove to work, he was certain she would be gone when he got home. Remarkably, each night, she was still there. Sometimes she ate before he got home, and sat locked away in her room with the TV on loud static. He could only assume she was talking to Mike and he prayed the boy was helping her see that he wasn't the monster she suddenly saw him as. Other nights, she joined him at the table, glaring at him over their dinners and retreating to the confines of her room as soon as they were done.

On the tenth day, she emerged from her room while he sat drinking his morning coffee. She sat across from him at the table, carefully collecting her thoughts. Finally she spoke. "I don't like what you did, but I think I understand why you did it. I forgive you." She reached out and grabbed his free hand, giving it a squeeze. "Mike helped me understand. You need to thank him."

Hopper stood then, setting down his mug and walking around the table, pulling her into a hug. Tears of relief fell as he kissed the top of her head. "I'm so sorry."

She hugged him back, smiling once more, before saying, "But if you EVER do anything like that again, you will be VERY grounded," echoing his own threat back.

He knew they had turned a major corner in their life together that day, as they both vowed total honesty and only making promises they knew they could keep. Two days later, Dr. Owens had surprised them with the birth certificate, making them officially father and daughter.

Standing in the rapidly cooling water, Hopper vowed to himself once more, he would not lose her. He had betrayed her once and nearly lost her, and he would do everything in his power to keep that from happening again. He suddenly felt an urgent need to get back to her as he shut off the water and began to dry off. Dressing quickly, and thinking to grab a second change of clothes to take with him, he headed for the front door. As he swung it shut, he turned and locked the pair of deadbolts, giving the door a final shake to ensure the house was secure. He turned and walked down the steps, got into the car and headed back to the hospital.

16. He Knows the Way

He Knows the Way

Somewhere Else

Time Unknown

Eleven's eyes flicked slowly open. This time, she wasn't at all surprised to find herself surrounded by the blackness. She was contemplating shutting her eyes and just going right back to sleep, when she was suddenly startled by a voice from somewhere behind her.

"Good morning. I was wondering how long you would be out."

She scrambled quickly to her feet and looked around, her eyes falling suddenly on a man sitting cross-legged a short distance away. He was an old man with silvery hair combed neatly to one side. A pair of gold, wire-rimmed glasses covered bright blue eyes. Time had left his face crossed with soft wrinkles that only deepened as he smiled. Something about him immediately put her at ease.

"Is it morning?" she asked, having lost all sense of time in the darkness.

"It might be. Or maybe not. You can't really tell here, so when I wake up, I think of it as morning. I've been awake for a while myself, so it feels closer to afternoon, but it would be morning for you."

Her head began to spin trying to follow what the kind man was saying, but she was also grateful to find there was someone else in this strange place. Perhaps he would have some idea what was going on.

"Where are we? Do you know?" she asked.

"Could be anywhere. Could be nowhere. I'm pretty sure we're somewhere." he replied, as cryptic as before. The whole time he spoke, his eyes remained fixed on a point off in the distance. Finally,

he turned to face Eleven. "So what brings you here, Miss?"

"I don't know. I can't remember what happened or what I was doing before. I just remember waking up here in the dark."

"Oh, is it still dark for you?" he asked, glancing around them. "Try looking harder."

Eleven began to wonder if this man was just as crazy as she was starting to feel. Still, he appeared to have a better sense of what was going on than she did, so she took another look around, staring as hard as she could into the distance. Suddenly, though she could not perceive the transition itself, the darkness was gone and her feet found themselves on solid ground. She was in a field, with soft green grass and wildflowers stretching off in every direction. A warm, mid-afternoon sun beamed down from a crystal clear blue sky.

Perceiving the change on her face, he asked, "Better? What do you see now?"

"A big field of grass in the warm sunshine," she replied. "Isn't that where we are?"

He gave a small, comforting chuckle. "We all see something different. Right now I am in a library, shelves stretching off in every direction with enough volumes to occupy a thousand lifetimes. It's three o'clock on a rainy winter afternoon; the perfect time to curl up in an overstuffed chair by the fire and sail away on an adventure."

She was puzzled at his description. How could they be standing together in two different places? She was about to ask, when another thought overtook it.

"Wait, you said WE all see something different. There are others?" she asked.

He smiled and held out a hand to her, which she took without hesitation. There was something about him that felt both safe and important. "Come, let's take a walk." Then, after a pause, he added, "I'm George, by the way."

"I'm..." she had to think for a moment before her name came back to

her, "I'm Jane."

"Pleased to meet you, Miss Jane," he smiled.

They walked together in silence for a few minutes, Eleven looking everywhere about her, still trying to figure out what this place was. George, on the other hand, strolled as though it were a normal spring afternoon somewhere pleasant. After a time, they came upon another person - a young woman - curled on the ground and slowly rocking herself back and forth, muttering.

"Good afternoon," he said, addressing her, though it was clear he expected no response. "Poor thing," he said, turning to Eleven as they continued on. "She's been here a while now and can't seem to come out of the darkness."

Eleven wanted to ask him what he meant and who that woman was, but for some reason she kept silent. Deep inside, a feeling told her they were making their way to something important. As they continued to walk, they past several more people, young and old, who all appeared similarly lost. George greeted each one as they past, though none responded.

After a period of time - she couldn't decide if it had been minutes or hours - they came to a stop at the crest of a small hill. "Let's stop and take a rest," George suggested. "In spite of everything else, my legs tire just as easily here as back home."

They settled into the grass, or rather, Eleven perceived them sitting in the grass while George pictured them settled into two soft leather chairs by a fire. After several minutes of silence, hoping that he would offer some kind of explanation, Eleven finally began. "So what is this place? Who are all those people we passed? I can't help feeling you know more than you're telling me."

He smiled. "You are a clever girl. I could tell right away you'd bring yourself out of the darkness. You were screaming that boy's name, Mike I believe it was, into the darkness only a few minutes after waking. You added Daddy the very next time. Most folks take much longer than that to get the bearings about them, if they figure it out at all."

She felt her head start to hurt once more, as it seemed there was an answer just out of her grasp.

He went on. "Okay, so here's the deal. We're all here, because our minds have been broken in some way or another."

A sickened feeling crossed through her and she could barely whisper her next question. "Am I dead?"

He gave a deep and hearty chuckle. "Heavens no. Trust me, you and I and everyone else here, we are very much alive." He paused, the look on his face becoming more serious once again, "When a mind breaks, it leaves the body behind, in a sense, and comes here. The body is left back in the real world. Yours, I expect, is lying comfortably in a hospital room right now, surrounded by the people who love you."

She gave a sad, half smile, at the thought of Mike and Daddy sitting there by her side, keeping her safe and waiting for her to come back to them.

"When the mind comes here," he went on, "it arrives confused and blank. Some people can recover their thoughts and eventually make the choice."

"What choice?" she asked, not quite sure she wanted to know the answer.

"Which way to go. To reach deep into the mind and fix what has fallen apart, to return to the body and life. Or, to decide they are done fighting, to let this life slip away, and move on to what lies beyond."

She sat stunned at the prospect. "What is beyond, if you choose to move on?"

"Oh, no one really knows that until they go, I expect. I like to believe there is a great adventure beyond that horizon."

"How do you know all this?" she asked. Then, clarifying, "I mean, if you're here, how do you know you can even go back?"

He smiled and leaned closer, giving a conspiratorial whisper, "I've

been here before."

It was not the answer she was expecting, and he almost laughed at the shock that registered on her face.

"A long time ago, when I was a much younger man, I fought in the army. One day, my unit came under fire and I found myself standing too close to where a mortar shell decided to fall. When I was thrown by the blast, my head smacked a rock and the lights went out. That was when I found myself here. I can tell you, that time, it took me quite a few tries waking up before I was able to get my bearings about me. Not like you," he said, giving her a wink.

She blushed at the compliment, before asking, "So if you know the way back already, why haven't you gone?"

His smile turned to a look of contentment before he spoke. "I haven't decided if I'm going back. Last time, I had my girl waiting for me. Jenny. I made her a promise, that when the war was done, I would come home to her and we'd get married, have a home, raise a family; live a life together. And I always prided myself on keeping my promises. This time, our kids are grown, living their lives, raising families of their own. I've lived a good, full life, and Jenny's waiting for me again. She passed away two years ago and I expect she's somewhere on the other side, tapping her foot impatiently, wondering what's taking me so long."

Eleven felt she had found a kindred spirit in George and his belief in the power of a promise and its ability to cross all boundaries of time and space. "In that case, why haven't you moved on the other way?"

"I don't really know," he shrugged. "Something deep down makes me think there's still something I'm supposed to do before I go on. Maybe it's helping you get back, if that's what you decide to do."

She thought for only a moment before rejecting the idea of moving on. She had a life still full of so much possibility to get back to, and people she loved. She had Mike and a lifetime of promises, spoken and not, to look forward to. "I want to go back," she said with resolve.

"I thought you might. For now, I think it's time for you to rest. Wanting to go back and actually getting there are two very different things and you will need all your strength."

She hadn't realized it before, but she was feeling quite tired again. She let out a yawn as she said, "Maybe just a few minutes." She lay on her side again, feeling the soft tickle of the grass against her cheek and the warm sunshine across her body. Her eyes closed in contentment, knowing that there would be a way back and a guide to help her along her way.

"You rest up. I'll be right here. I think it's time for a little Jules Verne," he said, as he picked a thick book up from somewhere unseen and flipped it open.

17. Setting a Trap

Setting a Trap

McChord Air Force Base

Tacoma, WA

June 18, 1986

Doctor Martin Brenner sat at his desk staring in contemplation at the folders sitting in front of him. For months now, he had been dutifully trying to put back on paper every detail he could recall across the duration of his grand program. It had been a tremendous blow to progress when they had been forced to flee the lab in Hawkins. Despite his mangled condition when they arrived in Washington, he had been ready to leap from his hospital bed and strangle his chief of operations. While he was eternally grateful that the man had managed to get Twelve safely out of the building and onto the plane with them, he had left behind every file and journal Brenner had been meticulously filling out for years. Even the subjects who had ultimately failed to produce the results he had hoped to find had provided insights into how to better identify future candidates.

Across the twenty-three subjects that he had identified and brought to the lab, only five had produced the outcomes he had envisioned. Still, given the tremendous results he was looking for, a twenty-percent success rate was remarkable nonetheless. Of course, there had been issues even with those five. Two had died from unrelated medical complications. Two more had betrayed him and escaped. That left him just one subject, and she was showing a serious limit in her abilities.

He flipped through the stack of folders and pulled out two of them, laying them side by side, apart from the others. Eleven. Twelve. The girls had been a once-in-a-lifetime find for the project; identical twins, born of a mother who showed extreme potential of her own. He had carefully inserted himself into her chain of medical care all through the pregnancy, to keep the truth of the dual pregnancy a

secret even from her. He had nearly lost control of the situation when Terry Ives had gone into premature labor, but a few well-placed bribes to the nursing staff had secured him his ultimate prize. One of the nurses later had a change of heart over her involvement, and that had regrettably required a more permanent silencing, but it had all been worth it to gain possession of these two girls he knew would be destined for greatness.

Together, they had taught him a great deal about identifying abilities, and the variety of forms those abilities could take. He had never dreamed the quiet, gentle girl would turn out to have the stronger set of gifts. To this day, he chastised himself for not recognizing her varied gifts sooner; to think he had come so close to terminating her out of the program. There were times over the years when he had momentarily felt guilty about the conditions necessary for Eleven's proper development, but in the end, the results would have been worth it. The plan had begun with selective isolation. Her only human contact would be with himself, and her daily sessions in the play room with subject Eight. After getting Eleven used to having a friend, Eight was pulled away as well, leaving only himself as her connection to the outside world. The idea was that her mind would crave contact so desperately, she would push it further and further to seek it out. The original idea had been for Eight to be the first target of her searches, but of course the brat had decided to run away before that could happen. He had been forced to improvise, but still Eleven's powers grew to tremendous strength in the lab. Outside the lab, after her own escape, it seemed they had grown even further.

He had several assistants still loyal to him working in the lab when everything fell apart in the fall of '84. Only one of them managed to escape with his life, but the story he brought back was simply incredible. Tearing open the portal in a moment of blind fear had been one thing, but returning to the lab and pulling it closed, after some force on the other side had torn it open even wider, was truly astonishing. He longed desperately to gain her back into his own possession, to pick up work where they had left off, but so far the girl had managed to evade his detection. Admittedly, he didn't have the reach he once did, and was left with minimal resources to track her. Still, he had a few selectively placed phone taps being monitored, including the Wheelers; that boy held a strong connection with her

but had so far shown no sign of making contact with her, wherever she was. Fortunately, a new avenue had opened up which he hoped could be used to draw her into the open once more.

He dug into the pile again and pulled a third folder from the stack. Eight. She had proved to be a remarkable girl in her own right, despite beginning her training so late. It was unfortunate she had never come to view him as Papa the way Eleven and Twelve had been raised; that fact had made it much easier for her to run when the opportunity presented itself. She had been a thorn in his side ever since, hunting down those formerly associated with the lab who didn't have the foresight to cover their tracks. He had thought there was chance that she would someday come for him directly. Still, it had come as a bit of a shock when she showed up on his front porch yesterday afternoon. It seems her powers had developed considerably out in the wild as well, as she had no trouble masking her progress over the gates and across the base, evading detection all the way. Twelve hadn't suspected a thing when she answered the front door and the girl was standing there, asking to speak with him; she had assumed it was one of the assistants who regularly stopped by to drop off or pick up files. Eight had drawn the gun silently as he came around the corner and could have easily gotten off several shots, but she had frozen at the sight of her Papa in the flesh after so many years. In that moment of hesitation, Twelve had done her job flawlessly, disarming the girl and knocking her unconscious; the whole situation was defused before he had even realized what was happening.

So now he had bait to dangle in the wind, waiting to lure Eleven in. She was properly restrained in his new lab across the base and precautions had been taken against the use of her manipulative techniques. It had come as a bit of a shock to her that the whole time she had been developing her powers in the lab, his men had been diligently working on devices that could nullify their effects, in the event she ever tried to turn against them. It was only out of sloppiness that the guards hadn't employed those measures the night she escaped, or she never would have made it off the grounds of the lab.

He had allowed Twelve the opportunity to try and figure out just

what Eight knew of Eleven's whereabouts. Eight had put up a good fight, hardened by a life on the streets after escaping the lab, but Twelve knew how to be persistent. The girl had a special love for her knives and knew how to inflict all manner of pain to get someone to spill their deepest guarded secrets. It wasn't just a task to her, she enjoyed every moment of it. It occasionally concerned Brenner how much pleasure she took in torturing information out of people. His only consolation was the fact that she was loyal and loved her Papa, and would never turn her skills on him.

After Twelve had worked her over for a while, Eight had spilled all the information she knew. Yes, Eleven was still alive. Yes, they had been in contact with one another on several occasions, including in person. Yes, she was still in Hawkins. Most surprising, of course, had been the discovery that she was currently residing with the police chief. Of all the people he had suspected, the chief had not been one of them. He had been so quick to give up her location in exchange for access to the portal to rescue the Byers boy, it had never occurred to him that Hopper might turn around and offer her shelter.

In either case, he knew where she was and who she was with. The only trouble was, he had so little manpower left, he had no hope of reclaiming her in Hawkins. No, she would have to come to him, on his own turf. But he had Eight, and he was certain the compassionate Eleven would show up, intending to rescue the girl. She would be harder to contain once she arrived, since her skill set seemed to cross so many realms of ability, but he had no doubt she would be under his control again very soon.

Hawkins, IN

June 19, 1986

Knock Knock Knock.

Mike wasn't sure, at first, what had woken him. He also hadn't been aware he had even gone to sleep in the first place, but as his eyes slid open, he realized his head was resting on his arm. Both his hands were gently clasping one of Eleven's as her slumber stretched onward. He forced his eyes to focus on the watch strapped to his wrist and saw it was a little after two in the morning.

Knock Knock Knock

Knock Knock Knock

The noise came again, and Mike realized that must have been what woke him. Not moving his head, Mike scanned his eyes across the bed to see what Hopper was doing. He had her other hand held tenderly in his own, as he repeated the series of knocks again on the wooden arm of his chair.

"Please come back," he gently whispered to his sleeping girl. "It's time to come back."

Knocking again, Mike suddenly understood what was going on, as the haze of sleep began to clear from his mind. Eleven had explained Hopper's signal when it was time to draw herself back home from the In-Between; it wasn't the unlock signal from the cabin, but was just as important to them. She had practiced diligently to hear the two sets of three knocks wherever she was and whatever else she was focused on. In that moment, Mike's heart broke for the man, desperate for his little girl to come home to him.

Closing his eyes again, in case Hopper happened to look his way, Mike lay there listening to Hopper's desperate pleas for her to come back, repeating their special knocking signal for what felt like hours.

18. The Road Home

The Road Home

Somewhere Else

Time Unknown

Eleven awoke and stretched, soaking in the warm sun shining down on her. She knew it wasn't right, but for just a moment she kept her eyes shut and tried to imagining she was back at home, stretched out on a blanket on the lawn overlooking the lake. She could picture the ducks paddling lazily around the cool water. She never ventured too close to the waters edge but loved to watch the gentle rippling waves on a breezy spring day from her perch on the hill. Eventually, she let her eyes slide open and pull her back to reality, or whatever this other place was. Still, she found it reassuring that the grassy hill and the warm sunshine had remained while she slept.

"Good Morning, Jane," came George's comforting voice from behind her.

She rolled over and faced her new friend, his book laying closed in his lap. "Good Morning, George," she smiled.

Sitting up, she looked around and was startled to see more people, like her, in various states of confusion. There seemed to be twice as many people as she had remembered seeing the day before. "Or the sleep before," she thought to herself. George had been right when he said there was little sense of time in this strange place.

Seeing her eyes looking about and stopping at regular intervals as she turned, George asked "So, you see them all too?"

Turning back to George, she nodded.

"That's good," he smiled back. "That means your mind is waking up more. I think you might be ready to give it a try. What do you think? Are you ready to go home?"

Eleven was on her feet in an instant and George had to laugh.

"Hold on now, it's not quite that simple. It's a short road but a long journey to get back. But as they say, the journey of a thousand miles begins with a single step. So let's take one, shall we?"

Eleven nodded and brightly replied, "Yes."

"Splendid. Have a seat," he said, motioning to the place she had been resting in the grass a moment before. She settled quickly and he went on. "First, we'll find the short road. Close your eyes. Take a deep breath and let it out slowly."

He paused and watched as she rested her hands gently on her knees and slid her eyes shut. She drew a deep breath and let it out slowly, settling her whole frame as she did so.

"Very good. Now, this next part will sound strange, but bear with me. I want you look deep into the middle of your mind. Somewhere in the turmoil and confusion there will be a light. I know that's probably hard to visualize, but concentrate hard and find the light. That light is the road home."

He sat back and watched the calm but determined look of concentration on her face. It had taken him weeks to find the light inside the first time he found himself here, and he was prepared to stick it out as long as it took to help his friend Jane get home.

After a few minutes of deep concentration, she startled George by asking, "What happens when you find the light?"

He laughed, "Let's not get ahead of ourselves. First we find the light, then we'll talk about what to do with it."

"I did find it," she clarified. "It's small and flickery, like a candle sitting alone in the middle of a big, dark room."

He leaned forward in astonishment, looking closely at the expression on her face and found no signs of confusion or misunderstanding. "Okay, you can open your eyes."

She slid her eyes open and was surprised to find George staring back,

looking confused for the first time since she had met him.

"I knew right away there was something special about you," he complimented, "but I never dreamed you would find your light that fast. How is that possible?"

She gave a sly smile and, in the same secretive voice he had used the day before, whispered "I've done that before."

Relishing the puzzled look on his face and figuring the confession couldn't cause any harm, she explained, "I can do things with my mind. I can make things move without touching them or send my thoughts somewhere else to see and hear people. So I've spent a lot of time exploring the dark corners of my mind already."

George shook his head with a laugh. "Well, my dear, at this rate, we just might have you home in time for dinner," he teased. Then, getting more serious once more, he continued. "Okay, so you know where to find your light, now comes the hard part. You have to focus on the light; focus just as hard as you can. With all the strength you can muster, you need to gather every fiber of your being and draw it to the light and pull yourself through."

He watched her face for signs she was following what he said. While she nodded along, she was still looking puzzled at the concept. He tried explaining another way, although if he was honest, the whole idea still confused him more than a little too.

"Think of it another way. Right now, it's a little like your mind is stuck inside out. And the light, that's the opening you can pull your mind through to bring it right-side out again. Does that help any?"

She smiled then, "Yes. I think I understand."

"Wonderful. Care to give it a try?" he teased, sensing her eager anticipation.

She closed her eyes and quickly found the light again. Concentrating, she reached out for the flickering point and began to pull her consciousness toward it. At first, it came easy and the light grew closer and brighter before her. However, the closer she got, the more

it felt like something was pulling her back. It was like stretching a rubber band, easy at first but harder and harder the closer it came to the breaking point. She fought onward, willing herself into the light, straining to get through. All at once she felt herself falling away from the light. Her eyes shot open and, panting hard, she fought to catch her breath.

George was sitting next to her now, a steadying hand on her shoulder. "I'm sorry," he began, consolingly, "I wish I could tell you the first time is the hardest, and it gets easier from here. The closer you get to the light, the harder it is to fight through. Many can't make it through, and there's no shame in that."

He was about to suggest she rest before trying again, but Eleven was already closing her eyes and bringing the light into focus again. She knew what she had to do this time, remembering her morning training with Kali. The name stirred a nagging feeling somewhere in her mind, but it stayed locked away along with so many of her other memories. Kali had taught her that her greatest strength came when she pulled forth her deepest anger. Thinking hard, she immediately pictured Papa. She saw him standing there, expressionless, watching as she was dragged kicking and screaming down the hall to be thrown into the dark room. She seethed at his betrayal, Papa who was all she had in the world, sending her off to that awful place. Her fists clenched, Eleven began to breath hard as she channeled the rage and pulled herself toward the light. She let out a primal scream, pulling with all her might and once again found herself suddenly tumbling away from it.

As she opened her eyes again, she leaned forward, slamming her balled fists into the grass in front of her. Her eyes burned as she shoved Papa's memories away from her mind, cursing how ineffective they had been.

"What on Earth was that?" George asked, staring at her fists, still planted firmly in the grass by her knees.

"I'm always strongest when I get angry," she shot back, harsher than she intended, the frustration at her failure still ebbing away.

"And how did that work out for you?" he asked with a hint of

sarcasm, then softening, "It's true, anger has a lot of power behind it, but raw anger isn't going to get you out of here."

Her face fell in frustration; she beginning to get tired again.

"Okay, try this for me." he offered. "Close your eyes and pull up your go-to angry thought. That one thing that just boils your blood and makes the rest of the world disappear." He watched as her face tightened involuntarily, the memory taking center-stage in her mind. "Okay, now focus on it, concentrate hard. Gather every detail about the scene; the sights, the smells, the thoughts that ran through your head. Let the whole experience fill every inch of you, down in your feet, out in your fingertips."

He let her stew on the memory for a second, her body responding to the memory of Papa. "Now how do you feel," he asked.

"Strong. Powerful." she said, through gritted teeth.

All at once, through a series of rapid, clipped commands directed at her, he snapped her back out of focus. "Eyes open. Up on your feet. Stand on your left foot. Balance."

Riding the wave of rage fueled adrenaline, she complied, snapping her eyes open once more. Her pupils were dilated wide, the normal soft chocolate brown looking almost jet black. Her breath came shallow and fast, hands sweating. Every muscle tensed as she stumbled to her feet and lifted one leg, fighting to steady herself.

"Catch," he commanded, gently tossing the book to her. She reached out, barely grazing the cover with her hand as she lost her balance and tumbled to the ground. The book landed softly beside her a moment later, falling open to a sketch of an enormous octopus surrounding a giant submarine with its tentacles. George settled himself on the ground at her side as she fought to catch her breath.

"Anger is like a thunder storm." he softly explained. "There is tremendous power in it, but a power that is terribly unfocused."

He let that sink in as she looked back at him, her eyes returning to their gentle, soft brown.

"How do I pull myself out, if anger is the only thing that makes me feel strong enough?" she asked, beginning to feel the trapped, desperate feeling she had experienced in the Upside-Down.

"What makes you think anger is the only thing that can make you strong? You have other emotions, just as powerful, able to fill you up with all the strength you could ever need, but leaving you centered and focused. Friendship. Compassion. Hope." he offered and then, with a smirk, "Love?"

At once she thought of Mike again. There were so many wonderful things about the world, and he was by far her favorite part of all of it.

Seeing he had struck the right chord with her, he instructed once more, "Let's try again. Eyes closed. Think about a moment you felt love. Love for another and their love in return."

She thought hard, her mind a swirl of memories of Mike. All significant, all wonderful, one coming into crystal focus before her. It wasn't exactly a happy memory, but the feeling ran so deep she pulled out every detail she could recall.

September. It had been the first half day after the start of school. The whole gang had decided to hit a diner in town for lunch. She and Mike had ordered a pair of the best cheeseburgers she'd ever had. As everyone finished, they all decided to order ice cream as an extra little treat. She hadn't thought anything of it as she chose a dish of strawberry and waited patiently, chatting with her friends and playing with Mike's fingers, intertwined in her own. Somehow, in all her time living with Daddy, she hadn't had ice cream. Their go-to desserts were always fresh cookies or peanut-butter cups.

The waiter brought out their treats, everyone grabbed spoons and started in. She had turned to laugh as Max described something embarrassing someone had said in class. She had brought the first spoonful to her lips and let the smooth, sweet, creamy flavor wash over her tongue. In an instant, her breath caught in her throat as her mind shot backward two years to another diner, to Benny, to the kitchen. She could remember the taste of the strawberry ice cream so vividly. He had let her have the whole carton as she sat there on the counter watching him scrub dishes. She had just put a spoonful to her

lips when she saw the bad woman shoot him in the head while his back was turned. She had seen what was going to happen, a moment before it was too late, and had been unable to stop it. The nice man had died because he had tried to help her.

Sitting with her friends, the frozen treat suddenly tasted like poison on her tongue. The spoon had dropped from her hand and clattered on the table as she sprinted for the door. Mike had seen the panic in her eyes as she bolted from the table and was on his feet in a heartbeat, just steps behind her. He kept her steady in the alley beside the restaurant, holding back her hair as her stomach rejected every bit of the lunch she had just enjoyed. He didn't care one bit that she had hit his shoe with part of the mess.

He didn't push her for an explanation as she collapsed, sobbing into his arms. He guided her away from the mess and sat beside the wall, pulling her into his lap and folding his arms protectively around her. He had just held her, rocked her, gently stroked her hair and soothed her as the nausea and memories fought their way around inside her. Eventually, once she calmed a little, she had told Mike the whole story about what happened that terrible day, from sneaking in to steal the fries right up to the moment he found her, lost and cold in the rain. At one point, Dustin had poked his head around the corner to see if everything was alright and Mike had gently sent him away, much to her relief. Daddy was the only other person she had told about Benny, and she wasn't sure she wanted anyone else besides Mike to know.

"I saw what was about to happen and I couldn't stop her; I couldn't help him. He died because he tried to help me." she said, lip quivering.

He gently turned her so she was looking right at him, though she had tried to look away in shame. "Nothing that happened that night, or any other, was your fault. You were a prisoner on the run from terrible people and the things they did were not your fault. Do you understand?" he asked, soft but firm.

Looking deep in his eyes and feeling his concern, his heart breaking for her in that moment, she knew he was right. "Yes," she whispered.

He had pulled the handkerchief out of his pocket; the one he always kept there just in case she had a sudden nosebleed, so she wouldn't ruin the sleeve of whatever she happened to be wearing. Gently, he wiped across her cheeks and at the corners of her mouth, cleaning away the tears and sick.

"Thank you," she whispered, nestling closer into his protective embrace. "I'm sorry I ruined lunch." she said, looking up at him, ashamed.

"You didn't ruin a thing," he comforted. "There's no way to know what things might trigger a terrible memory until they happen the first time. As for the guys, they understand. Whether you feel like telling them at some point or keeping the story to yourself, they all know that horrible things have happened to you and they will always be there for you, whatever you need."

She had looked up at his comforting eyes, that gentle smile and leaned up to kiss him, before pulling back at the remembrance of being sick only minutes before. Despite the overwhelming feelings she had for him right then, she didn't want to gross him out. Seeing her move forward, hesitate and begin to pull back in uncertainty, Mike leaned down, closing the gap and planted a soft, gentle kiss on her lips.

Sitting on the grassy hill, she let the feelings of that day fill every fiber of her. His love, devotion and unending patience filled her with more strength and peace than she thought possible.

"So how do you feel now?" George asked.

A strong, confident smile crept across her face. "Good. Strong. Really strong. I'm going back to him."

"Good, very good," he said, slow and calm. Suddenly, he snapped out his instructions as before. "Eyes open. On your feet. Balance on your left foot."

With the grace of a dancer, she unfolded and sprang up, landing gently on one foot, arms thrown wide. She settled easily this time into a steady balance and slid her eyes open, soft and gentle

chocolate again.

"Catch," he instructed, tossing the book to her.

Arms unmoving, confident in her strength, she reached out with her thoughts and grabbed the book, stopping it in front of her face and giving it a gentle spin. Setting her raised foot back down, she reached out and gently took hold of the book, handing it to an astonished George before settling back into the grass.

Smiling, she addressed George. "I need to rest now. Then, I think it's time for me to go home."

Smiling back at the amazing girl, he nodded. "Sleep well. Captain Nemo and I will be right here when you're ready," he said, opening the book once more.

19. A Long Time Coming

A Long Time Coming

Hawkins, IN

June 19, 1986

As her stay in the hospital neared the end of its first week, Hopper and Mike had begun to accept the fact there was no obvious end in sight to the coma that gripped Eleven's mind. While Mike was coming to grips with the fact that she would not come out of her current state as fast as he had originally hoped, there was still no doubt in his mind she would find her way back to them. She had done it before, though in a more physical manner, but she had come back to him nonetheless. She had promised he would never lose her again, and she always kept her promises. Hopper was not nearly as confident as the boy who had been his constant companion for the past week. He hadn't said so out loud, but Mike could see the pain he fought so hard to hide from his face; Hopper was preparing himself to lose another daughter.

The week was beginning to take a physical toll on both of them. They ate little, subsisting mostly on stale coffee. They slept even less, never lasting more than a couple hours at a stretch. Even then, it was hardly restful, sitting slumped in the room's visitor chairs, always keeping one of Eleven's hands held protectively in their own. Finally, at Hopper's insistence, they agreed to start taking turns sleeping at home for the night. Only after getting Hopper to promise he would call, whatever the time of night, if there was any change, Mike agreed to be the first to go home.

Nancy readily agreed to come and pick Mike up late in the afternoon, so he would have time to clean up before dinner. As he climbed into the front seat beside her, she was shocked at how one week had utterly transformed her little brother. While he had always been lean, he looked skinnier than ever now, having lost close to ten pounds sitting around living on little more than coffee. The dark circles around his eyes betrayed just how exhausted he was. Perhaps most

startling was the stubbly beginnings of a beard darkening his jaw. She knew from sharing a bathroom that Mike had been shaving for almost a year, but she had assumed it was still a patchy, youthful peach fuzz. Looking at him now, she realized it wouldn't be much longer before he could grow a beard to rival the Chiefs. She had to remind herself her little brother wasn't so little anymore, especially after all he had been through this week.

As they drove through town, they chatted about minor, insignificant things, neither wanting to address the situation that had dominated their every thought for the last week. Halfway home, she realized he was asleep, head resting against the cool window beside him. After parking in the driveway, she gave his shoulder a gentle shake.

His head snapped to attention. "El!?" he asked, in a panic.

"Shh, it's alright. We're home." she soothed, holding a steady hand on his shoulder.

Realizing where they were, he brought a hand up to rub the exhaustion from his eyes. "Sorry. Thanks for picking me up," he said. Neither of them said a word about the tears that came away on his hand, brushed away and hidden by the quick wipe.

He walked inside and up the stairs to his room and gathered a change of clothes. He walked across to the hall and began running hot water for a shower. As he waited for the water to make its way up the pipes from the water heater in the basement, he leaned against the counter. Every muscle hurt from a week of misuse. His mind was a gray fuzz of confusion and he felt as though he had aged thirty years in the last seven days. Studying his reflection in the mirror, he was relieved to find he looked just as bad as he felt. His eyes fell on the stubble covering his chin and was surprised at the progress made by a week of neglect. He turned his face first to one side, then the other, taking in the extent of the growth, before turning and stepping into the shower.

As he stood under the soothing cascades of, he contemplated whether he should keep the stubble or shave it off. He had to admit he felt just a little more grown up with the look, but as time went on, it could also turn into a painful reminder of how long Eleven had been

lying in that hospital bed. Finally, he resolved to shave it off as soon as he stepped out of the shower. He wanted to look exactly as she remembered him, smooth chin and all. He knew if she woke up, she was going to be confused enough without him looking different too.

A sob suddenly caught in his throat. If? Had he just said *if*? He had been fighting the thought back for an entire week. He knew logically it was a dangerous possibility, but until now he had kept himself convinced that she would wake up at some point. Sure, he had shed plenty of worried tears during the week, but they had been different worries. Worry that she might be in pain. Worry that wherever she was, that she was scared. Worry that when she woke, that there may be some unknown damage; that she might be injured or changed somehow by the experience. While he and Hopper hadn't discussed it, the presence of the blindfold around her neck when they found her was a clear sign that whatever happened was related to her powers. He had spent many hours worrying over what that could mean. In all that time, though, he had never let himself contemplate the idea that she might not wake at all.

Not aware of how or when it happened, Mike found himself kneeling on the floor of the shower, tears streaming down his face, mixing with the hot drops pouring down from above. His breath came in short sobbing gasps as he thought of life without her. Losing her the first time had nearly killed him. The only thing that kept him holding on that year was the distinct possibility she was still alive and safe somewhere and that she would find her way back to him. This was different. If she left him like this, there would be no hope; no chance of her coming back.

Eventually, his tears began to subside and his breathing slowed once more. He lifted his head and let the rapidly cooling water stream down over his face. He had a new resolve in his heart. She promised he wouldn't lose her again, and she kept her promises. He had promised her he would keep her safe and he intended to keep it. No power on Earth or anywhere else was going to pull them apart again.

He shut off the water and stepped out as Nancy tapped on the door to let him know dinner would be in twenty minutes. After making quick work of the stubble on his chin and scrubbing the coffee residue off his teeth, he dressed and went back into his room to repack the bag

Nancy had brought him days before. He tossed the old cloths, stinking of the hospital, into the laundry and gathered two clean outfits. While he was due to be back at home the day after tomorrow, he wanted to have a spare just in case he stayed an extra night. While he was certain Hopper neither cared or even noticed whether he was showering at the hospital, Mike was determined that when Eleven woke up, she was going to be greeted by the clean, smiling face of the boy she loved and not the disheveled stinking mess he had been an hour earlier.

Everything repacked, he set the backpack next to his bedroom door and headed down the dinner. Nancy had already agreed to take him back over to the hospital as soon as breakfast was done in the morning, and he intended to be ready. Sitting down at the table, he noted everyone else had already dished up and started on the meatloaf and potatoes. It wasn't his favorite dinner, but in light of his newfound resolve, he realized for the first time in days he was actually hungry and dished up a thick slice of the steaming loaf and a generous scoop of potatoes. He didn't know how long this euphoria would last, but he intended to appreciate the emotional respite.

Karen Wheeler looked across the table with concern at her son. She had been dismayed at his appearance when he returned home earlier. He had been so lost in a daze as he stumbled through the front door he hadn't even noticed her greet him from the living room. A shower and fresh clothes seemed to have revived him, but he still had a look as though he could crumble again at any moment. She prayed things remained stable through dinner and then she could talk with him to find out how he was really doing. Just then, the phone rang in the kitchen and Mike practically leapt out of his chair, his fork clattering down onto the plate as he dropped it.

Karen shot him a nervous look and stood, saying "I'll get it. You keep eating."

She walked into the other room and answered. Mike sat on the edge of his seat, scarcely breathing as he listened to figure out who was calling, terrified it would be Hopper with bad news. He let out a strangled sigh of relief when he heard his mom say "Oh hi, Pam." It was just one of her friends, calling to gossip once again.

Mike had only just picked up his fork again to continue on his dinner, barely touched so far, when his dad looked up from his own plate, noticing his son at the table for the first time.

"Mike, nice of you to finally join us. Feels like you haven't been home for dinner in days. Been spending all summer inside with your friends playing that dragon game again?"

Mike just stared at his dad in disbelief. He turned and looked questioning at Nancy who just rolled her eyes at their father's self-absorbed cluelessness. She had explained to their parents what was happening that very first night after she and Jonathan had visited. Mike looked back at Ted once more, 15 years of indifference boiling to the surface, fueled by the raging fire the last week had left him in.

"You feel like you haven't seen me in days? But your not sure? Try a week. I haven't been here in a week. And you haven't even noticed I was gone?"

Ted looked back up from his plate in shock; Mike was never one to raise his voice and talk back like that. There had been that brief period a year ago when he started to get rebellious, but that phase had passed quickly.

"And do you want to know where I've been? I know Nancy already told you once but clearly you didn't care enough to listen. No, I wasn't hanging out with my friends 'playing that dragon game.' I've spent the last week sleeping at the hospital because my girlfriend is in a coma. I'd think that would be something interesting enough to catch your attention for 30 seconds, but apparently not."

Failing to recognize the ticking time bomb sitting across the dinner table, Ted asked, "Since when do you have a girlfriend? I didn't think you even knew how to talk to a girl. Why haven't we ever met her?"

Nancy got up from the table then and, taking her sister's hand, guided Holly into the kitchen. She knew the situation was about to turn ugly and as much as she wanted to step in and diffuse it, she knew it had been a long time coming and was something Mike needed. She had watched him fall apart for a year when Eleven went away the first time and knew this week had been a repeat of that

hell. For their uncomprehending father not to notice what was happening was amazing.

Mike was in a simmering rage. "Are you blind? My girlfriend Jane. Jane Hopper. The girl who has spent almost every weekend here for the last year."

"Hopper? The Chief's daughter? You're telling me your dating that drunk's kid? No wonder she's in the hospital, kid's probably on drugs. Like father, like daughter," he chuckled to himself.

Mike stormed to his feet at the insinuation, sending his chair flying behind him. Slamming his hands on the table, he leaned across, getting right in his father's face.

"You think you're some kind of father of the year? You weren't even sure if you've seen me in the last week. You've had no clue that I've had a girlfriend for the last year. You know what will blow your mind even more? The chief adopted her to get her away from a bad situation. Want to know where she came from? Remember that Russian girl you were so certain I couldn't possibly have been involved with three years ago?"

He paused, letting Ted recall the surprise visit from people he thought were FBI agents. Continuing in a mocking imitation of his father, "Because how could nerdy Mike Wheeler possibly be associating with a girl. Well guess what, that's her. Yeah, that's right. The girl who's sketch you still have hung above the phone, right next to the number for those FBI agents, has been parading in and out of this house for the last year and you've had no fucking clue."

He took a few deep breaths, letting the shock settle in on Ted's face before diving in once more. "Ready for another shock? Despite how much you may think you know exactly what happens around here, she really did live in the basement, right under your nose for a week and you never had a damn clue. A Russian spy hiding out in Ted Wheeler's basement."

Ted was about to offer a reply but Mike just kept on going. "Oh, and I haven't even gotten to the best part yet. She's not Russian, and those agents that came by, they're not really FBI. She's from right here in

Indiana, born and raised. She was kidnapped as a newborn by the psychotic son of a bitch running the Hawkins lab. That's where she was raised, like some kind of caged lab rat, trained up to be a weapon. All sanctioned the country you're so proud to declare yourself a patriot for."

Drawn by the sounds of Mike's raised voice, and noticing that Nancy and Holly had retreated to the kitchen, Karen had rushed back into the dining room but stood on the sidelines, letting her boy speak his mind. She knew it was something that had been building for a while. It astonished her sometimes how clueless Ted could be when it came to his own children and the things that went on under his roof. She had been almost certain that the supposed Russian spy and Jane Hopper were one in the same, the first time Mike had brought her over for one of the Sunday board game sessions with all his friends. Of course, she knew that if she was right, no good could come from pointing it out so she had held her tongue. She had never liked the fact that Ted so readily let those agents into their home to rummage through their belongings and eavesdrop on their private calls. In silent protest of the phone taps, she had taken it on herself to tie up the line every possible minute with the most mind-numbing conversations possible. She had made friends with every gossip in town she could, as her own silent revenge against whatever poor government agent had to sit and document all that was said across the line.

Mike stood there, face red, sweat beading across his forehead. He stared hard into his father's eyes, refusing to break contact, daring him to say one single word. "The people in that lab took a little girl, cut her off from virtually all human contact. Poked and prodded and starved and beat and tortured her. Against all odds, and at the risk of her own life, she managed to escape. After they almost caught her at the school, she had to go into hiding. She couldn't stay here anymore, you saw to that. So she had to live out in the woods like some kind of animal. In the winter. Living on squirrels and whatever else she could catch. All to keep safe from the people trying to drag her back to the lab and throw her in a cage. Now, it turns out, some of those people are still out there, still hunting for her."

Mike could feel his anger giving way to something else and knew he

was on the verge of breaking down again, but he had to finish what he intended to say; the chance might not present itself again. "And for your information, she not on any drugs and neither is Chief Hopper. Her toxicology screens all came back clean. So has every brain scan the doctors can come up with. Their all stumped as to what's going on. The girl I love is lying in a hospital bed, with machines doing most of her breathing for her, and no one has a damn clue why and my own father is going to sit there and try and throw out his two cents about someone he doesn't even know?"

Storming out of the room, he ran back up to his bedroom, taking the stairs two at a time. For a brief instant, he moved to slam the door behind him. Instead, he grabbed his bag and started back down the stairs, going for the front door. He couldn't stand the thought of sleeping in this house tonight. He halted as he passed the dining room and leveled one more cold, threatening glare at his father.

"You are not going to breath a word of what I just said to anyone. Not one single word. If someone finds where she is, or who she is..." he trailed off, leaving his father's imagination to fill in the rest of the threat.

He turned and walked out the front door, slamming it behind him and knocking several pictures on the hallway table to the ground.

"Once again, top notch parenting, Ted," Karen said disgustedly. She turned and walked back into the kitchen, leaving Ted to ponder his meatloaf in silence.

After marching across town for more than an hour, Mike arrived back at the hospital and made his way back up to Eleven's room. Hopper looked up in confusion as he walked in.

"I thought you were sleeping at home. I told you I'd call if there was any change." As Mike stepped out of the hallway and into the dim light of the room, he could clearly see Mike had been crying and was barely holding it together. "What happened?" he asked, in much gentler tone. Hopper stood and walked over to Mike, catching him in one arm and pulling him close as the boy dissolved into sobs once more.

Mike explained the dinner blowup and confessed that he spilled everything to his father in a fit of rage. Initially, Hopper was mad that Mike spilled the secret, knowing that the more people who knew the truth, the more dangerous it was. He held it back because he could see how hurt Mike was. "I'm sorry kid."

Recovering a bit, Mike resumed his place at Eleven's side, taking her hand in his, soaking in the comforting warmth of her fingers intertwined with his own. Looking up at Hopper once more, Mike quietly apologized, "I'm sorry I told him. And I'm sorry he said those things about you."

Giving into the exhaustion of the day, Mike put a second hand gently on Eleven's and laid his head down on his arm. "You're a better father than my dad could ever hope to be."

Hopper just stared, his heart melting just a little as he realized the double meaning behind what Mike had said. As he gave in to his own exhaustion and closed his eyes, he decided it was probably fine that Ted knew. Nancy already knew, Karen wouldn't want to put her son in danger and Ted was.....well Ted was just Ted. Who would he tell?

20. Trying Again

Trying Again

Somewhere Else

Time Unknown

"I want to warn you, Jane, that this is still going to be tough," George said with concern. "Don't be discouraged if it takes a few tries to get there."

"I know," she said, a determined smile on her face. "I'll give it my all. And if it's not enough, I'll rest and try again."

"A smart plan," he complimented with a smile.

"And you'll stay with me, until I make it?" she asked.

"Of course, I'll be right here until you make it home. I promise." he comforted.

She threw her arms around him then, planting a quick kiss on his soft, wrinkled cheek. "Thank you."

"Think nothing of it, Miss Jane. Now, off with you, can't keep Mike waiting," he teased.

Settling gently into the grass, she closed her eyes and calmed her breathing. She thought of the people she wanted to be back with, and everything they meant to her. She thought of Daddy and the long road they had walked together becoming a family. She thought of Lucas who had taught her the importance of honesty with friends and hadn't hesitated to call her out when she was hiding something important. She thought of Dustin who had, without second thought to his own safety, scooped up her barely conscious body and whisked her to safety as they ran from the demogorgon when it attacked the school. She thought of Will, the boy she could talk freely with about the experience of surviving the Upside-Down; together they had helped each other heal and move past that terrible place. She thought

of Mrs. Byers, who lovingly allowed herself to be called mother, and had lived up to the name in every way. She thought of Mama, who had sacrificed everything to try to rescue her little girl. She thought of Nancy and Jonathan, who had helped to destroy the prison she had been raised in. She thought of Max, the girl who taught her all about jealousy, and whom she now counted as one of her best friends.

She held onto all these people as she found the light once more, and began to draw herself toward it. She quickly added George to her list of important people. The companion who had guided her through this strange and mystical place and who helped her to discover where her strength truly lay. She focused her whole being on the light and could feel it growing brighter, beginning to surround her. She pulled hard at it, calling forward her biggest strength.

She thought of Mike and tried to recall every amazing moment they had shared, the good and the bad. Finding her in the rain. Bringing her home. Promising to keep her safe. The way he looked at her when she walked into the SnowBall, as though the rest of the world had ceased to exist. The kiss they shared. Every comforting embrace as she fell apart. Every time he helped put her back together again, better than before. Infinite patience. She pulled hard at the light, the world feeling so close.

She could feel her grip begin to falter and she pushed harder still, refusing to let go. She was so close. Her hand instinctively shot to her wrist, her fingers twisting into the hair tie. Daddy's blue band. Sara's band. Daddy always said the band gave him strength, when he didn't think he had enough of his own. He had given it to her for when she needed help being strong. She hadn't thought about it before, but in that moment, she added Sara to the people she loved. She had never met the girl, but Daddy had loved her with all his heart, and that meant she loved her too. She owed it to Sara to take care of their Daddy since she couldn't.

She focused once more on their faces. Daddy. Sara. Mike. She pulled herself desperately toward them, the light surrounding her, filling her. Suddenly she felt like she was falling again. She clung desperately to the light as she felt the world go black around her.

Hawkins, IN

June 20, 1986

Eleven's eyes flickered open and darted around the room. Her head felt heavy and her arms still didn't want to move, but everything felt real. For a brief moment, she started to panic, thinking she was back in the lab. The harsh light on bright white walls and the faint scent of cleaners felt uncomfortably familiar. But then she spotted the colorful cards, taped high on the wall where she could easily see them.

She was suddenly aware of fingers intertwined with her own on her left hand. Not knowing what else to do, she gave them a squeeze.

"El?" She would know his voice anywhere.

A moment later, Mike's face came into her field of view. His beautiful eyes were a wash of grief and concern, joy and astonishment and above all, undying love.

"El!" he said again, tears of relief building in the corners of his eyes. Reaching with his free hand, never taking his eyes off her's, he shook Hopper's shoulder. "Hopper, get up. She's awake."

Mike reached to the call button at the head of her bed and clicked it furiously, summoning a nurse from the station down the hall. A small smile spread across Eleven's face, overjoyed at seeing Mike and knowing she was home. She went to say his name but found there was something in the way, something hard and smooth running into the corner of her mouth and down her throat. She raised her free hand in panic, trying to feel for what it was, her eyes wide with alarm. Mike reached for her free hand, taking it in his own.

"Shh, it's okay," he soothed. "It's just a plastic tube. It's been helping you breath. The doctors will come and take it out now that you're awake."

She calmed down then; Mike had told her everything was okay, so she knew it was. Hopper's face appeared in her field of view then.

"Jane!? Jesus you scared me," he said, eyes filling with tears of his own. He leaned down to kiss her forehead, a hand on her shoulder.

She did her best attempt to smile, though the movement caused the tape holding her breathing tube in place to tug uncomfortably at her skin. Looking back and forth between Hopper and Mike, her own tears of relief beginning to fall, she reached her right hand over to find one of Hopper's. For a quiet minute, she held their hands, grateful to be home. All three shed fresh tears as the last week washed over them.

All too soon, the room was a flurry of activity as doctors and nurses poured in to assess her condition. Mike and Hopper were shuffled back into the corner of the room, assuring Eleven they weren't going anywhere. The hospital staff had originally tried to send them down to the waiting room but it quickly became obvious it would require armed security to drag Hopper out of the room, so they agreed the two could stay, provided they stayed in the corner and let the doctors do their job.

After making an initial assessment that she was fully awake and alert, had active reflexes and appropriate responses to light and sound, the doctors agreed to remove the breathing tube. They offered to let her hold someone's hand while they worked and she immediately stretched out an arm toward Mike. Sitting by her side, Mike held tight to her hand as the doctor gently slid the tube back up out of her throat. Eleven fought back a gagging nausea at the unfamiliar feeling of the tube coming up, squeezing tightly to Mike's hand and hoping she didn't break his fingers in the process. Hopper watched from across the room as the scene unfolded. The dread of seeing her on the ventilator was replaced with a wash of relief watching it being removed. He kept reminding himself that if the doctors were removing the tube, it meant she was through the worst of the danger.

With the tube out, the doctor set about checking for vocal damage.

"Can you say something for me?" he asked. "Just one word is fine."

Looking at the boy gently holding her hand in his own, she croaked out "Mike," her throat scratchy and raw.

"Good. Very good. Your throat will probably be scratchy for a few days and it will hurt to talk or swallow. Just take it easy and things should heal up just fine." he reassured. "Alright, I think that is all for

now. I'll leave you to rest for a bit. One of the nurses will be back in a while to have you try a little water and see if you can keep that down alright. Guys, you take good care of her," he teased, looking at Mike and Hopper.

The next two days passed in a bit of a blur for the trio. Eleven said very little as her throat continued to heal. After being unconscious for a full week, she found her energy severely lacking, waking for around an hour at a stretch and then napping again. Hopper and Mike rarely left her side, and as before, were never gone at the same time. Nurses and doctors were in and out regularly, checking on her progress. Slowly but surely she worked her way up from sips of water to bites of jello. At one point an offer of ice cream was extended, to help sooth her raw throat but Hopper expertly steered the offer around to a small dish of pudding instead, much to her relief. Sunday morning she successfully kept down some scrambled eggs and a few bites of toast.

By early Sunday afternoon, the hospital agreed to release her to go home. The doctors were hesitant, their concern primarily revolving around the fact that they still had no idea what had put her under in the first place. However, every test they ran came back clean and they reluctantly signed the forms to turn her over into Hopper's care. Per hospital policy, she was required to be brought down to the entrance in a wheelchair so one was brought up to her room. Hopper helped get her settled into the chair before going down to the nurses station to sign the final release paperwork. She sat, watching Mike finish packing up the last of her cards and gifts and getting things ready to go home. Hearing her happily humming, he looked over and was surprised to see her rolling the chair slowly back and forth, though her hands were folded neatly in her lap. Quickly glancing at the door, he looked back at her, grinning.

"Very cute El," he teased, "You know Hopper will have a heart attack if he catches you doing that here."

"Sorry," she smiled, letting the chair roll to a stop once more. "Happy."

Coming over and kneeling next to her, he placed a gentle hand around the back of her neck and softly kissed her. "I'm so glad you're

okay. I love you, El."

She nuzzled her cheek against his hand and smiled. "Love. Too."

Hopper came back then and eyed the two of them suspiciously and shook his head with a laugh. "Alright you two. What do you say we go home?"

Eleven smiled up at him and nodded, "Home."

21. Going Home

Going Home

Hawkins, IN

June 22, 1986

The drive across town to the Hopper residence was nothing like the mad-dash a week before in the other direction. Mike and Eleven sat beside one another in the back seat, his arm protectively around her and a smile of contentment permanently glued to his face. She was leaned against his shoulder, half-dozing as they drove, wearing a peaceful smile of her own. In the front seat, Hopper kept his foot light on the pedal and stopped carefully at every light, forcing himself to keep the ride as gentle as possible. Nearly every minute he checked the rearview mirror, reassuring himself it wasn't some kind of a fevered dream; she really was back there, alive and well and safe.

Arriving home, he turned slowly off the road and down the gravel driveway, parking as close as he could to the front steps for her.

"Let her sleep for a few more minutes. I'm going to go change the sheets on her bed real quick," he said, chastising himself for leaving the blood-soaked bedding in-place all week.

Hopper walked quickly up the porch steps and unlocked the front door, anxious to get Jane settled into bed. The doctors had been insistent that she take it easy for a few days until she got her strength back and he knew he was going to have his hands full trying to keep her from overdoing it. Stepping through the kitchen, he couldn't shake the feeling that something wasn't quite right. He stopped and listened to the silent house, turning slowly and looking for anything out of place. Nothing seemed amiss, so he brushed it off as a week of frayed nerves and little sleep. He stepped into the living room and his eyes immediately locked onto the files boxes, still stacked in the corner. The lid on the top box was backward once more.

The perfectionist in him remembered perfectly having put the lid on the right direction when he was packing up the files after their night of reading the journals. He hoped with all his might that Jane had simply gone into the boxes again; he had never come through the living room on his visit to shower and he certainly hadn't taken time to even look at the boxes when Mike's scream had summoned him down the hall that terrible night. Quickly stepping up to the box, he pulled the lid off and was greeted by three gaps in the files; everything for Eight, Eleven and Twelve was missing. He ran down to her room to see if she had simply taken the files there to read them further, though he knew even before he got there that they would be gone. A quick tour of the room confirmed the missing files were not there. Dashing back into the living room, he surveyed the space more closely. This time his eyes fell to the fireplace mantle and Sara's picture sitting by itself; Jane's school portrait was gone too.

He had known this day would come, though he had hoped it was just overly-cautious paranoia. He backtracked through the kitchen and down the hall to his room. Everything there seemed as it had been days before when he had come home to shower. He pulled open the top drawer of his dresser and was relieved to find his revolver there, just as he had left it. Sliding out the cylinder, he confirmed the weapon was loaded and ready. Grabbing the holster and the spare box of ammunition he kept in the drawer, he made his way through the kitchen, picked up his keys from the counter and locked the door as he went back outside.

Mike was just helping Eleven climb slowly out of the back seat when he saw Hopper step back out through the front door, locking it behind him. Gun at the ready in his hand, his eyes were wide with panic as he scanned the yard and the trees beyond.

"Back in the car, both of you," he shouted as he walked quickly toward the car and slid behind the wheel.

Mike wasted no time helping Eleven settle back into her seat and helped her buckle, Hopper already throwing the car into gear and starting up the driveway in a spray of gravel. It took only seconds for Mike to register the gist of what was happening as they pulled out onto the main road once more. All of Hopper's calm, delicate driving was gone, replaced with practiced purpose.

Breaking the silence, Hopper explained the situation as briefly as he could. "Someone's been through the house. They've taken the files for Jane, Eight and Twelve. They've also taken Jane's picture from above the fireplace. Nothing else in the house has been touched so I think it's safe to guess at who was behind this."

Mike and Eleven stared at each other in stunned silence as Hopper scrutinized a car passing them in the opposite direction. The two of them had also known it was likely this was going to happen someday, especially once they knew that Brenner was still alive.

Hopper went on, staring in the rearview mirror at Eleven. "I've been getting ready for this on some level since the day you followed me out of the woods and put your trust in me to keep you safe. I promised you I would never let them get their hands on you and I mean to keep that promise. We have to disappear for a while, and I'm not going to lie, I don't know how long it will be before it's safe to come back."

He saw Mike tense up suddenly, his face draining of all color in panic at the thought of losing her all over again.

"Don't worry Mike, you're coming with us," Hopper reassured. "If they're looking for Jane, they know you're the one to go through to get to her. Your family will be fine; Brenner's people always knew they had no clue what was going on. Also, I know that if I separate the two of you, you'll stop at nothing to find each other, so you're safer together"

They smiled in relief at one another as she gave his hand a squeeze, words still painful in her throat. As long as they were together, they knew they would be alright.

Getting serious, Hopper called Mike's attention back up front once more. "So I know you handled the Blazer fine in the parking lot the other day. Do you think you can handle the car out here on the road? I need you to be honest, can you drive this safely for about ten minutes for me?"

Mike nodded, "Yeah, Nancy has taken me practicing in the parking lot up at the school. I can drive if you need me to."

"Good. Get up here." He waited while Mike gave Eleven's hand one more reassuring squeeze and then climbed up into the passenger seat. "Here's what's going to happen, so listen closely. Both of you. In a couple miles, I am going to pull off the road. I have something stashed there I need to pick up. As soon as I get out, Mike, you are going to slide over here and start driving. Stick to the speed limit and don't draw attention to yourself; it's 40 along here."

He slid the watch off his wrist and held it back over his shoulder, passing it to Eleven. "Jane, you're going to keep track of time. You guys are going to drive for four minutes up the road. Then, you're going to turn around and drive the four minutes back to get me. Now this next part is more important than anything I have ever asked of either of you and you have to do exactly what I tell you, understand?" He paused, waiting for both to give him an affirmative nod. "When you get back, pull into the turnoff. If I don't come out of the trees immediately, you pull back onto the road and you keep going. If there is another car stopped there, don't even slow down. You go. Yes?" Once again, they nodded gravely, the severity of what he was suggesting beginning to sink in.

As he drove, Hopper pulled his wallet out of his back pocket and fished four crisp \$100 bills from under a hidden flap. Holding them up briefly for Mike to see, he tucked them under the revolver sitting on the seat beside him. Addressing Mike this time, he went on, "If you go, you need to go far. I'm not going to tell you where, because I can't know. But you need to get as far from Hawkins as you can and find some place to hide out. Make that money last as far as you can. Jane can check on me from a distance and when things are safe, I'll find some way to let her know. Mike, until that happens, I need you to take care of her; keep her safe at all costs." He glanced down at the seat once more and Mike followed his gaze to the gun, and understood the gravity of what Hopper was asking of him. Mike also knew there was not a doubt in his own mind he would do anything and everything to keep her safe.

Looking once more in the mirror, he addressed his daughter solemnly. "Jane, if anything happens, and you guys have to go, I need you go and stay safe. If Brenner's people get ahold of me, they're going to try and torture your location out of me; they did it before

and I know they won't hesitate now. That's why I'm not telling you guys where to go. If you reach out to check on me, whatever you see them doing to me, you have to promise me your not going to come back until I let you know it is safe. Can you do that for me?"

Barely holding it together, she nodded, "I promise."

Reaching a hand back, he took hold of one of hers, "Whatever happens, Jane, know that I love you more than anything in the whole world."

She squeezed his hand back, choking out "Love you. Too."

Arriving at the pullout, Hopper pulled over and threw the car into Park. As he climbed out, Mike slide over and took his place behind the wheel. He looked at the two of them sitting in the car, and steeled himself to the idea that this could be the last time he ever saw them.

"So, see you in eight minutes?" Mike asked, forcing as much hope into the question as he could.

Hopper nodded and then, casting one last look at his daughter, turned and walked into the woods. Mike put the car into gear and, after checking over his shoulder, pulled back onto the road. He glanced in the mirror to make sure Eleven was watching the time and saw her wipe a single tear from her cheek.

"He'll be okay," he offered, though he knew it was nothing he could promise. "When the times up, you can tap my shoulder if it hurts too much to talk."

She nodded, and they past the next few minutes in contemplative silence. At the end of the four minutes, Eleven leaned forward and tapped Mike on the shoulder, holding up the watch in the rearview mirror for good measure.

"Thanks," he said, as he pulled off onto the shoulder. After checking in both directions, he pulled a u-turn and started back toward the pullout. In the whole drive since leaving Hopper, they had only encountered one other car, and Mike understood exactly why he had

picked the spot he did. As the time ticked away, their anticipation continued to grow. Finally, with seconds left on the clock, Mike steered the car around the final bend in the road and the pullout came into view. A brief, initial relief washed over them when they discovered no other car parked and waiting. Mike eased off onto the wide gravel shoulder and waited, unsure if he should put the car in Park or not. Both of them held their breath as they watched the trees for any sign of Hopper. After several excruciating seconds, Mike was preparing to pull his foot off the brake when Hopper stepped into view once more.

Letting out a sigh of relief, Mike put the car into Park and threw open the passenger door before clambering into the backseat. Hopper tossed two large black duffle bags onto the seat and slammed the door before moving quickly around the front of the car and slid in behind the wheel. As he moved to put the car in gear, Eleven lunged forward and threw her arms around him in as tight of a hug as she could manage with the seat-back between them, burying her face in his neck.

Hopper raised a hand and gently patted the side of her head, "It's okay. Daddy's here." After a moment far too short for either of them, he gave her head a final pat, stating "We've got to get going. We're sitting ducks out here right now."

Taking his meaning, she released her grip and settled back in her seat once more, allowing Mike to help her with the seatbelt. The day was beginning to exhaust her as Hopper pulled the car back onto the road and pointed them North and out of town. After a few silent minutes, in which the three fugitives caught their breath and came to grips with the fact that nothing bad had happened so far, Hopper turned to the business at hand once more.

"Okay, so here's what's going to happen right now. We are heading for Chicago. That should be far enough away and big enough for us to get a motel room and lay low for a couple days while we figure out our next move. We need to figure out just what kind of danger we're in, and we need to get Jane into bed to recuperate. We got lucky this past week but hospitals are out of the question right now. Mike, grab the bag with the red luggage tag from up here."

Unbuckling, Mike leaned over the seat and grabbed the black duffel with the red tag, dragging it into the backseat with him.

That done, Hopper continued, "Okay, outer pocket, there should be a wallet, can you get that out?" Mike searched for the zipper and moments later had a black leather wallet in his hand. Up front, Hopper fished out his own wallet again and then, grabbing the bills tucked under the revolver, passed the stack back to Mike. "Move all the cash from my wallet to the new one. Leave everything else and pass the new one up to me."

Mike opened Hopper's wallet and retrieved the bills, totaling \$75, and added that to the \$400 he had pulled out earlier. Flipping open the new wallet, he was surprised to find a drivers license already in place. Though it had Hopper's photo, it was labeled Jack Roberts of Evansville, Indiana. A credit card in the same name sat in the slot next to the license. Slipping the loose bills quickly into the wallet alongside the \$100 already there, he passed it up to Hopper, who quickly tucked it back in his pocket.

"Okay, you two next. Open the main section and grab the purse." Mike pulled back the main zipper and found a pale blue purse laying on top of the other contents. "Open it up, there's a wallet for each of you in there. Mike, move any money you have in your wallet into your new one, then give me both of our old ones."

Mike pulled two wallets from the purse; a pale blue one matching the purse and a slim black leather one. Pulling open the black one he was surprised to find a school ID card with his photo on it in the name of Brian Roberts, indicating he was a student at Central High School of Evansville. Mike realized, as he moved the \$12 from his own wallet over, adding it to the \$25 in his new one, that Hopper had been including him the escape plan for quite a while. After passing the two empty wallets up to Hopper, Mike handed the purse and blue wallet to Eleven, who flipped her own open to discover another Central High School ID with her photo and the name Ellen Roberts. It brought a smile to her face that, for a while, she got to be El again.

Hopper saw the two eyeing their new identities and continued the explanation of his plans. "I don't know how long we are going to have to stay gone, or where we are going to go. For the time being,

whenever we have to go around other people, we are the Roberts family. I'm Jack, you can call me dad, that should be easy enough. Brian. Ellen. You guys are going to have to be brother and sister when we're in public. I know it's not ideal, but it's a cover story that is believable. You can stay close to one another, but you're going to have to watch the affection and the lovey-dovey looks you're always giving each other. Mike, you can stick with calling her El, that should be fine. Jane, you're going to need to remember to call him Brian. If you slip up, his middle name is Michael, but avoid it if possible. I can't stress how important it is to call each other the right names when we're around anyone else. We have to assume Brenner's people are watching for us now."

"Okay, Dad," Mike said with a grin, trying out Hopper's new title. He had to admit, Hopper as his father wouldn't be the worst thing in the world.

"We're going to keep a low profile and try to stay out of sight as much as possible. Just in case, I have paperwork up here to back up our new identities. If it somehow comes up, your birthdays are the same, pretty much. Mike, you were born the same day, but a year earlier in '70. Congratulations, you're 16 now. No, I'm not buying you a car," he added, glancing back in the mirror with a grin of his own.

Settling into a more comfortable position in his seat, Hopper finished his speech, "For now, we're headed to Chicago to find a room for the night, probably two. Tomorrow, we'll figure out what our next steps are. Might as well catch a little sleep if you can, we still have a couple hours drive ahead of us."

Eleven nodded and laid her head down on Mike's shoulder, snuggling into his side as he put an arm around her, pulling her in close. Hopper could tell the whole affection thing was going to be a problem, but that was something for later. He decided to let them have their moment of comfort while they could.

They drove onward into the evening twilight toward the city. In a little town just short of their destination, Hopper pulled into the parking lot of a small grocery store and sent Mike in for food. The two of them had gotten pretty used to living on coffee in the past week, but Jane needed to eat if she was going to regain her strength,

though both were amazed at just how well she was already doing after spending a week unconscious. Mike returned to the car with sandwiches and Cokes for the two of them, and a yogurt and juice for Eleven. Hopper also couldn't help but notice the familiar yellow box in the bottom of the bag and he threw Mike a knowing glance.

"What? They get pretty soft when you let one thaw." he said, defending the purchase he knew would speed Eleven on her recovery more than anything else. She smiled over at him, taking an educated guess at what surprise he had bought her.

Just outside the city limits, Hopper pulled off the road and into the parking lot of a quiet, nondescript motel. Picking up the holstered revolver off the front seat, he passed it over the seat-back to Mike.

"You guys stay here, I'm going to get us a room," Hopper said. Seeing the hesitation on Mike's face as he took hold of the holster, Hopper added, "I know it's a lot to ask, but get used to it. Whoever stays with her is going to be armed."

Mike looked back, resolve returning to his face. "I know. If something happens, I know what I have to do. They're not taking her away again." he said through gritted teeth.

Hopper gave him an appreciative nod and exited the car, returning a few minutes later with a room key. Pulling around to the back side of the building, he parked in front of door 132 and they all climbed out. Mike and Hopper each grabbed a bag, while Eleven stretched and then followed them up to the door. Turning the key in the lock, Hopper gave the knob a twist and pushed the door open. Flipping on the light switch by the door, he surveyed the room, satisfying himself it would serve the purpose. It was no Hilton, but it looked clean and safe.

Following him into the room, the first thing Mike took note of was the pair of beds. It didn't take much imagination to figure out how the sleeping arrangements were going to go. Eleven would obviously get one of the beds, needing as much comfort in her recovery as possible, and Hopper would most certainly claim the other. Mike quickly resigned himself to a night on the floor, though he was used to it thanks to years of sleepovers with his friends. If it meant he got

to be with Eleven, he was ready for whatever conditions he had to sleep in.

Securing the lock behind them, Hopper slid a chair over and wedged it under the doorknob for good measure and turned to look over the room again. Eleven had already taken a seat on the foot of one bed, looking ready to fall right back to sleep. Mike just stood there, duffle bag still in hand, looking awkwardly around.

Hopper had been wrestling with the decision for the last hour but decided it was the only answer that made sense. "Alright, here's what's happening tonight. The bag with the green tag is for you two. I have a few changes of clothes and pajamas in there for each of you. Right now, you can take turns getting changed for bed. We're having lights out in twenty minutes." He took a deep breath and let it out slow before continuing. "It's been way too long of a day and I don't have any fight left in me. I'm taking the bed closest to the door. Jane, you get the other bed. Mike, you can sleep there too."

They both stared back at him in astonishment, certain they must have heard him wrong.

"Look, every fatherly instinct is telling me I should be making him sleep on the floor or out in the car. I'm willing to give this a chance, but NO funny business. You hear me? Anything inappropriate, at all, and he's sleeping with me for the rest of this little adventure. Got it?"

Mike nodded his agreement quickly, terrorized at the mental image of Hopper snuggling up to him in the night. Ten minutes later, Eleven was tucked safely in bed, already fast asleep. Mike sat on the edge of the bed, watching the peaceful smile on her face as she slept, such a transformation from the hospital. He couldn't believe it had only been early that afternoon she had been playfully rolling herself back and forth across her hospital room, ready to go home. Now here they were, hundreds of miles from Hawkins and no idea where they were going next.

Leaning down, he planted a soft kiss on her cheek. "Goodnight, El. I love you."

"Night," she murmured back, too lost in sleep to even know she was

saying it.

Walking around to the other side of the bed, he climbed under the covers and settled himself at what he hoped was a respectful distance from her. As Hopper walked out of the bathroom, Mike's eyes followed him across the room, terrified he would suddenly change his mind about the sleeping arrangements.

"Oh, calm down," he teased. "Just don't do anything to make me regret my decision."

As if on cue, Eleven rolled over in her sleep and tucked herself against Mike's side. Mike's expression dissolved into a look of frightened apology.

Hopper let out an exasperated sigh as he reached over and flicked off the bedside light.

22. Taking Flight

Taking Flight

Chicago, IL

June 23, 1986

Eleven awoke suddenly, with an uneasy feeling in the pit of her stomach, and it took a moment for her to recall exactly where she was. She relaxed a little when she realized she was curled up tightly to Mike's side, a protective arm around her shoulder. From behind her, on the other bed, Hopper snored in the comforting, familiar fashion she had grown so used to when they were living in the cabin. As the fog of sleep cleared away from her mind, she focused in on what had woken her. While she had been unconscious in the hospital, she had been unable to recall anything that had happened in the days leading up to the point when she suddenly awoke in the dark, wherever her mind had gone. As soon as she regained consciousness in the hospital, everything had come flooding back. She remembered the journals, going to spy on Papa and Twelve, helping her sister with Papa's test and Papa addressing her as she observed him in his office.

She also remembered every moment of her conversation with Kali. When she thought about it, she could almost still feel her rooting around the corners of her mind, trying to seek out Papa's location. It had been one thing when she planted the projection of Papa in her mind back at the warehouse. This was something different, much more personal, rooting around in her deepest thoughts and trying to steal what Eleven had been desperately trying to keep safe. Kali had held her mind hostage, refusing to let her break the connection until she got the information she wanted. She felt violated and betrayed by the sister she thought she could trust; Kali could have killed her in her arrogant attack.

Worse still, she didn't think it could be a coincidence that the people working for Papa had chosen this week to come and recover the files from her home. She had initially worried it was because she had reached out to spy on him, but she decided that couldn't be it. Papa

would have had no way of discovering her location simply from her finding him in the In-Between. If he had known her location any other way, he would have come for her long ago. No, the only thing that made sense was for Kali to have done something stupid and fallen back into Papa's hands.

She had been mulling over all these things for the better part of three days now and was no closer to an answer as to what she should do about it all. She was thankful she was still unable to speak more than a few words at a time before her throat began to feel raw again. Because of that, Daddy and Mike hadn't pushed her for answers yet. They were so relieved that she was alright that they were content to wait on anything else. All weekend they had described their week by her side, and it brought a bright smile to her face knowing just how loved she was. At the same time, it made Kali's betrayal sting that much worse. If she had fallen into Papa's clutches, then Daddy and Mike were in danger as well, and that was something she couldn't tolerate.

Slipping quietly out of Mike's arm, she rolled over and sat up on the edge of the bed. The clock on the table between the two beds displayed 2:15 in numerals glowing such a harsh bright green she had to squint her eyes to make them out. She knew it was harder to reach out and find people when they were asleep, but she had to try and find Kali. Despite everything, she still wanted to know if her sister was safe. She stood and was pleased to find her balance was returning to normal as her legs got more use. She paused by the bathroom door, assuring herself that Mike and Hopper were both still fast asleep. Closing herself in the little room, she left the light off and began running water in the sink, providing enough background static to reach out. With a little apprehension, remembering her last disastrous trip into the In-Between, she shut her eyes and pushed her mind out to find Kali.

After a few minutes of searching, her sister came into clear focus and Eleven's suspicions were confirmed. Kali sat in the middle of a dimly lit warehouse, hands and feet bound to a chair. On her head rested a net of wiring, much like the one Papa used to monitor her brain back in the lab. She pulled her focus back and found the warehouse was in a remote corner of McChord; clearly Papa's new lab. Pushing her

focus close again, she could see her sister was in bad shape. Intricate lacerations criss-crossed her arms and legs, scabbed over with blood left untended. Similar cuts run up the sides of her neck and across her cheeks and forehead. Bruises blackened the skin around one eye. As much as she hated what her sister had done, her heart broke seeing her like this. Whatever information she had given up, she hadn't done so without putting up a fight. Stepping close to her sister, she knew what she had to do.

Hoping not to startle her, Eleven leaned close and sent a soft whisper into her mind, "It's me. I'm okay. I'm coming to get you out."

Kali's eyes flickered open as she looked around the warehouse, trying to figure out where the voice had come from. Exhausted by the effort, she closed her eyes and let her head fall forward again.

Eleven opened her eyes, pulling herself back into the motel room. She might feel like killing her sister later, but right now, she needed to go rescue her. It had taken mere moments to convince herself it was what she had to do; convincing Mike and Daddy would be much harder. Shutting off the water, she quietly opened the door and walked back into the room. As she approached her side of the bed, she realized Mike was awake and holding up the blanket for her to slide back in next to him.

"Everything okay?" he whispered, concerned.

"Yes," she replied softly, planting a kiss on his cheek before settling back against his side.

He pulled her in close and soaked up her warming presence. Within minutes she was fast asleep again, while he lay awake mulling over thoughts of his own. When she had leaned in to kiss his cheek, he had immediately picked up the subtle but familiar scent of fresh blood. Combined with the lengthy time she ran the sink with the lights off, he could hazard a decent guess as to what she had been doing. He knew the last time she had sent her mind out in search of something, it had gone disastrously wrong. If she was sending her mind out again, it had to be really important. As much as he didn't like to push, he knew he was going to have to ask her about it in the morning. Pulling her in closer, he planted a kiss to the top of her

head and then settled back into sleep himself, dreaming of a life where she could be happy and free of her past once and for all.

Hopper awoke the next morning to a harsh sunlight trying to fight its way through thick motel curtains. His eyes immediately slammed shut again as his mind argued for another hour or three of sleep before facing the new day. Behind him, he was aware of Mike talking quietly but he did his best to tune it out as he tried to shut his mind off from the world again. After about a minute, he realized that Mike carrying on one side of a conversation but Eleven wasn't responding.

"Is he on the phone?" Hopper wondered, beginning to panic.

He rolled over, ready to rip the phone out of his hands and chastise him for risking their safety. He was more than a little surprised to see the phone still sitting unused in its cradle. Mike and Eleven were sitting cross-legged on the bed, facing one another. Her eyes were closed, while he watched her face with focused attention.

"So she's there now? With him?" Mike asked.

He paused, waiting for her response. Hopper had been involved in one of these mental conversations with her on several occasions, but it was still a bizarre thing to witness from the outside.

"If you're sure, you know I'm with you. Hopper's not going to like this, though."

"What am I not going to like," Hopper groaned, alerting the two he was awake and listening.

Two pairs of eyes snapped guiltily over to Hopper as he sat up and swung his legs over the side of the bed.

"Sorry," Mike apologized. "Her throat is still bothering her, so this was the only way to talk to her."

"It's fine," Hopper said, still clearing the sleep from his head. "So what am I not going to like?"

Mike looked to Eleven for support, hoping she would break the news herself. Although she could easily reach into Hopper's mind and

explain things for herself, she looked back at Mike with soft, pleading eyes, silently begging him to once again do it for her. Although she she was resolved in what needed to be done, she was still afraid of being the one to ask.

"Jane..." he began, hesitating. "She says we need to go to Washington."

"Of course she wants to go somewhere," he thought, rubbing his eyes and trying not to immediately shoot down the idea. "It's too early and I have no coffee, so you're going to have to go slow. Start at the beginning."

Mike took a deep breath and launched into an explanation of everything Eleven had told him that morning. He told Hopper how she had gone back to look in on Brenner and Twelve several times, including their day out in the desert. He told him how she had delivered the news back to Kali, and how Eight had ripped the location from Eleven's mind, knocking her unconscious in the process. Hopper turned a deep red, his face twisted in anger at the news that Kali had once again invaded her mind and almost killed her in the process. Somehow, he managed to hold his tongue and allowed Mike to continue.

"She went and found Kali again last night. Dr. Brenner has her now and he's been torturing information out of her. Jane..." he paused once more and then, bringing the conversation back around to the beginning, "she wants to go and save her."

"No. Not a chance," Hopper spat out without hesitation. "You just got out the hospital. You've spent the last week unconscious and now you want to fly across the country and rescue the girl that did that to you?"

In a flash of anger, Eleven was off the bed and standing before Hopper, staring him dead in the eyes. Suddenly, he felt her present in his mind, her eyes never breaking contact.

"She is my sister. I'm not leaving her with Papa. He has to be stopped." she sent forth into Hopper's mind.

"Look," Hopper said, softening his initial reaction, "I know she is your connection to your past and you care about her. She's also the reason we're on the run in the first place. She reacted on impulse, just like you're doing now, and she wound up a prisoner again."

"We will plan. We will be safe," she pushed.

"If we go, you're going to be walking into a trap," Hopper objected. "For all his faults, Brenner isn't an idiot. He's using her as bait and you're playing right into his hands."

Standing taller, never breaking eye contact, she choked out an ultimatum through a voice still scratchy and raw, each word an effort. "You come. Or you stay. I go!"

"No, you're not," Hopper growled, standing himself, towering over the girl. "You're not going to put yourself at risk like that. We're staying here and that's final."

Three hours later, Hopper found himself in the passenger waiting area at Chicago's O'Hare airport, holding three tickets to Seattle. Though he had been present for the whole thing, he still had no clue how she had managed to convince him that this was somehow a good idea. Perhaps it was when she reminded him that Kali had tried to rescue her during her own escape from the lab years ago. Maybe it was the fact that, beyond trying to reason with her, there was nothing he could physically do to keep her from leaving. In that case, his only choice was to go along to do everything he could to keep her safe.

Whatever the reasons, there he sat, waiting for their flight. Mike and Eleven stood by the window, looking out at the plane they would soon be boarding. Mike was speaking a mile a minute, telling her everything he knew about planes and flight and what to expect. He had found early on that the more she knew about a new situation, the better she was able to handle it. For her part, Eleven soaked in every word, watching him with her usual adoring fascination.

A few minutes later, the trio boarded the plane under the guise of the Roberts family, headed off to Seattle to visit family. Mike led the way down the jetway, with Hopper bringing up the rear, casting nervous

glances around for any signs of anyone taking too close an interest in their group. He had a nagging fear that whoever had been sent to the house might still be keeping tabs on them from a distance.

As they boarded the 757, Eleven took a slight comfort in the fact that the interior looked similar to the bus she had taken when she ran away to Chicago. There were certainly more seats on the plane, but the layout provided a solid point of familiarity, putting her mind somewhat at ease. As they reached their row, Mike offered her the window seat, which she happily took, anxious to see what there was to see outside. Mike settled next to her in the middle seat, with Hopper taking the aisle.

As they buckled in, Eleven stared out the window in fascination at the bustle of activity below. Soon, the plane was pushed back from the gate and out onto the taxiway. Her apprehension began to set in as the engines spooled up and the plane prepared to taxi toward the runway; this no longer felt like the bus. The rising whine of the engines set her nerves on edge and she looked over at Mike, seeking assurance that everything that was happening was going as it was supposed to. Giving her a reassuring smile, Mike extended a hand out and gently took hold of hers. He knew they were supposed to be acting like a brother and sister right now, but a quick glance around revealed no one who would even take notice. Feeling a little better, she intertwined her fingers in his and looked back out the window. The trip toward the runway felt like it took forever as they slowly rolled forward, waiting for a line of planes ahead of them to each take their turn climbing into the sky. Eventually, it was their turn and the plane curved onto the runway.

The whine of the engines grew higher still as the plane throttled up for takeoff. Eleven was no longer sure she wanted to do this, though she knew deep down it was already too late to change her mind. As the pilot let off the brakes and the plane jolted forward, she let out a sharp gasp and gave Mike's hand a tight squeeze. The rapid acceleration forced her back in her seat like a giant hand pressing on her chest and she felt an involuntary whimper escape her lips as she stared hard, eyes glued to the landscape now rushing past her window at an ever increasing speed.

Mike leaned in close and whispered, just loud enough for her to hear,

"El? Are you okay?"

"No," she thought, "Nothing about this is okay. We are going way to fast. Why do we need to be going so fast? People are not supposed to go this fast."

"Yes," she squeaked out in response to Mike.

Seeing the ashen look on her face, Mike knew immediately she was anything but alright. Just then, the plane pitched upward and lifted off the runway, the ground falling away below them. At this new sensation, Eleven began to panic, her breath coming shallow. Mike reached up with his free hand and held the side of her face, gently turning her away from the window.

"Look at me El," he began softly, as comforting as he could. "It's okay. It's okay, to not be okay."

Giving a half nod, she squeezed her eyes shut and leaned her forehead into his shoulder. Sliding his free hand further around, he gently stroked her hair, holding her as best he could with both of them buckled firmly into their seats. As they climbed ever higher, she would begin to relax and then suddenly tense again as the plane bounced through a pocket of turbulence. Once they were above the clouds, the winds calmed and she grew more accustomed to the droning of the engines. Lifting her head and opening her eyes again, she gave Mike a bashful smile.

"Thank you," she whispered.

Reaching her free hand up, she planted a quick kiss on the tip of her finger and then held it out, just above the armrest that separated them. Smiling and taking the hint, Mike discretely kissed a finger on his own free hand, and then gently pressed it to hers. It had been Eleven's idea during school, so they could share a quick kiss under the watchful glare of teachers. Mike was certain he heard a brief, exasperated groan from Hopper as they shared the finger-kiss, but at the moment, he didn't much care.

Eleven turned to look out the window again, much more pleased with the view this time. Her eyes marveled at the dazzling, bright blue sky

above and the puffy white clouds now far below them. Perhaps flying wasn't so bad after all, she thought.

23. Making Plans

Making Plans

Tacoma, WA

June 23, 1986

The remainder of the flight passed peacefully for Mike and Eleven. After the plane leveled off at its cruising altitude, and having enjoyed a passable airline lunch, Eleven nodded off for a nap. She did her best to make it look like a complete accident when she curled up against Mike's side to sleep, trying her best to still act like Mike's sister.

Mike tried flipping through the magazine in his seat-back, but mostly he spent the flight lost in thought over what they were flying toward. They were all in agreement that Brenner was likely setting some kind of trap and were relying on the hope that they could avoid his carefully laid plans, free Kali and make their escape. He had every confidence in Eleven's ability to fend off any attack her Papa might send her way, but that didn't alleviate the fear that there was something serious they were overlooking. Somewhere in the skies over Montana, Mike finally succumbed to sleep as well, curling back into Eleven, completely by accident of course.

Sitting quietly in his aisle seat, Hopper was lost in thoughts of his own for most of the flight. He too couldn't shake the feeling they were rushing headlong into the jaws of a shark waiting to tear them apart. His unease was deepened by ghosts of his past that he couldn't force back any longer. He had been to McChord Air Force Base once before, and that trip had ended in disaster. More than twenty years before, fresh out of high school, he had been drafted into the army along with most of the other guys from his class. His unit had passed through McChord as their last stop on American soil before shipping off to the fight in Vietnam. By his side that trip were his best friends, Preston and Hank. The three of them had been inseparable since their Little League baseball days. They had shipped off as fearless kids ready to fight for their country and stamp out the communists. A year later, Hopper had returned to Hawkins with a shoulder torn to shreds

by bullet fragments, while Preston and Hank returned home in flag-draped coffins. Now here he was, flying off to McChord again, heading straight into danger with the two people that meant more to him than life itself. If history decided to repeat itself, he swore to himself it would be her that made it out of this alive, and he was certain Mike would agree with that sentiment.

The final descent into Seattle was uneventful. As they started down, Mike had explained what to expect at every step along the way, and Eleven felt much more prepared for the bumps and noises the accompanied a routine landing. Soon enough, the plane's wheels touched down on solid ground and the aircraft slowed to a stop at their gate. As the other passengers rushed to gather their belongings and exit the plane, Hopper held the pair back, opting to be the last off the plane. Hopper led the way, with Mike taking up the rear as they walked up the taxiway and into the terminal. Mercifully, neither Brenner nor his agents were waiting for them among the eager families greeting newly arrived passengers.

After retrieving the two black duffles from baggage claim, they made their way over to the rental car desk. Hopper selected the cheapest car that would still fit the three of them, nervously laid down the Jack Roberts credit card and held his breath while the clerk scanned it. After an agonizing minute in which he plotted several escape routes, should the card not be accepted, the clerk happily passed over the set of keys.

"Enjoy your visit to Seattle," she said, far to perky for Hopper's taste.

"Thanks," he grumbled, taking the keys and picking up the bag at his feet.

Mike and Eleven followed behind, nervously scanning the crowd for a face they recognized, or someone who appeared to recognize them. They made a lengthy walk through the parking lot and finally located the red two-door Ford they had rented. Despite being the taller of the two, Mike offered to take the back seat so Eleven didn't have fold and scrunch herself passed the passenger seat. As the pair settled themselves into the car, Hopper tossed the bags into the trunk. He took a quick glance around, ensuring they were alone, slipped the revolver out of his bag and tucked it into the waistband of his jeans

before slamming the trunk shut and climbing into the driver's seat.

Only once they had left confines of the airport and merged onto the highway headed south did the trio finally breathe a sigh of relief. Hopper had been certain, at every step of their journey, that Brenner's men would be waiting to ambush them and bring the fight to a head once and for all. Each time they didn't appear, he couldn't decide if it left him feeling relieved or even more apprehensive. Whatever the feelings, they pushed onward, each mile drawing them closer to the spider's web.

Hopper counted themselves lucky that Brenner had not chosen - or had chosen for him - a remote base, distantly removed from civilian populations. Instead, located about 45 minutes south of Seattle, McChord Air Force Base was surrounded on three sides by the city of Tacoma, with businesses and residential neighborhoods built right up to the edges of the base. This gave them the advantage of setting up camp in a motel practically on Brenner's doorstep and hopefully blending enough into the local population to observe with relative safety while they planned their next move.

In a repeat of Chicago, Hopper pulled up to the motel office and went inside to register, though not before passing the gun off to Mike. It had already become routine, and the expectations were communicated with the simplest of glances. Returning moments later, he carried with him a room key and a folded map of the city. Parking in front of the room, Mike and Hopper each grabbed a bag from the trunk and they all walked in to assess what was to be their home for the foreseeable future. Once again, it appeared clean enough to suit their purpose. The room still fell one bed short of Hopper's preference, but he had already made his peace with that. His eyes then fell gratefully on the in-room coffee maker, which he resolved to put to good use during their stay.

After taking a few minutes to use the bathroom and unpack a few things from the bags into the room's dresser and closet, they found themselves sitting around with nervous energy, unsure quiet what to do next. It was hard to believe that only a little more than 24 hours had passed since they checked Eleven out of the hospital, with every intention of settling her quietly at home to continue recovering. Instead, they found themselves almost 2000 miles away, hiding in a

motel and preparing to sneak their way onto a secure Air Force base.

As Mike and Eleven set on the end of one bed, his arm around her tired shoulders, Hopper reached into his bag, retrieved a notepad and pen, and began jotting down a list. They watched in silence as he wrote, unsure just what he was planning. Finally, he broke the silence, turning to Mike.

"How much do you have in your wallet right now?" Hopper asked.

Mike quickly pulled the wallet from his back pocket and flipped it open, taking quick stock of the bills inside. "Looks like I have \$30 on me." he answered.

"Okay," Hopper nodded, getting out his own wallet. Pulling out a \$20 bill, he passed it, and the list, over to Mike before continuing. "I saw there was a little grocery store about a block up the road. You alright walking up there to get a few things we need?"

Mike glanced down at the list and nodded. "Yeah, of course." He could feel Eleven tense at his side, realizing he would be going out alone and not wanting to be far from his side for even a minute. "Hey," he said, turning to her, "I'll be alright. It's just a short walk up there and then I'll be right back."

"Yes," she nodded, her voice finally feeling like it was returning to normal.

After pulling his shoes back on, Mike stood and Hopper stopped him. "When you get back, give the old knock from the cabin. Do you remember how it goes?" he asked.

Mike had only been fortunate enough to visit the cabin a handful of times, but the knock that granted him the access to see Eleven was forever burned in his mind. In answer, Mike tapped out the familiar code on the top of the dresser; two knocks, one, three.

"Good," he went on. "Now, I don't think you're going to have any problems, but you need to keep your eyes open, alright? Watch out for anyone taking too close an interest in you. If you feel like someone's following you, don't lead them back here." He paused, then

added. "If you get back to the door and someone is with you, reverse the knock: three, one, two. That'll at least give us some kind of warning. Got it?"

"Yeah, I've got it," Mike confirmed, glad that Hopper had thought so much of this out already. Turning to Eleven, he pulled her into a hug and planted a quick kiss to her soft, rosy lips. "I'll be right back," he reassured her.

"Be safe," she ordered, the unease flowing through her words.

With the list in hand, he headed out the door and down the street to gather what they would need to survive for a few days. Without a refrigerator in the room, the fare was going to be sparse, with a lot of peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and coffee in their future. As he walked the aisles with a basket in hand, he added a box of ritz crackers and a can of easy cheese in hopes of picking up Eleven's spirits a little. She had loved it the first time he made her a plate of "smiley face crackers" and he hoped that little callback to happier moments would ease the tension of what was to come. As he scanned down the list, Mike was surprised by some of the non-food items Hopper had included: sticky notes, pens, tape and more notepads. It almost felt as if he were setting up an office in their little motel room, though in a way, it made sense. There was a lot to plan before they made their move and they needed some way to get it all organized.

After paying for their supplies, and walking back up the block toward the motel, Mike was relieved to find that no-one in the vicinity was taking any notice of him at all. Stopping at the door to the room, Mike set down one bag and knocked out the code with his free hand: two, one, three. Hopper pulled back a corner of the curtain to confirm Mike was alone and then unlocked the door, securing it quickly behind Mike as he stepped inside. The room had taken on an air of preparation in his absence. Eleven sat quietly on one bed, a black bandana-turned-blindfold over her eyes. The alarm-clock radio sat tuned to static and it was obvious her mind was in that other place she went to find things. Spread out on the other bed was the city map, which included an outline of the base and several of the major roads within.

"Any problems?" Hopper asked as Mike began to unload the bags,

arranging the consumables on the dresser and passing the planning supplies over to Hopper.

Mike shook his head. "All quiet out there," he said, then added, "too quiet. It's got me nervous."

"Yeah, me too." Hopper agreed. "Would you mind throwing together a few sandwiches? After following you for the whole walk to the store, she decided she wanted to get down to business, figuring out what to do next."

As if on cue, Eleven lifted the blindfold from her eyes and walked over to the map, studying the streets until she found what she was looking for.

"Here," she said, pointing to an area well within the boundaries of the base. "Papa's house."

Jotting on a sticky note, Hopper labeled the location where she was holding her finger. Seeing the sticky note, she turned and realized Mike had returned.

"You're back," she squealed as she nearly tackled him in a hug, burying her face in his neck.

"I'm back," he agreed, wrapping his arms around her. "I'm okay."

After reassuring her he was, indeed, back safely, Mike returned to the task of fixing sandwiches and brewing up a pot of coffee. As he plated up the simple meal, he passed Eleven a chocolate milk he had bought special for her, knowing she had no interest in the harsh black liquid that had become Mike's lifeblood over the past week. She gave him a grateful smile as she took a sip of the creamy treat, marveling at how even as he was watching for danger and trying to get back as quickly as possible, he had thought to pick out something special just for her.

Settled on the beds, the three ate sandwiches in relative silence. Their motel was located less than a mile north of the base's runway and almost directly under the path of aircraft on their final approach. Every few minutes, the silence of the room was broken as pilots in training brought their four-engine heavy-cargo jets in for a practice

landing before powering up, taking off and circling around to repeat the cycle. While the deep whine of the engines was an annoyance for the first few passes, it quickly faded into the background of the room as they finished eating and got to work in earnest.

Hopper started by taping the map up to the wall so they could all get a better idea of the area they were working with. The base was bordered along the north by a highway, cutting across just above the end of the runway. The west side was similarly bordered by a second highway. To the east, civilian neighborhoods nestled right up to the gates, running the full length of the base. Finally, along the bottom, just beyond the southern end of the runway, a public road formed the dividing line between the Air Force base to the north, and Army Base Fort Lewis to the south.

For the next few hours, Eleven alternated between journeys into the In-Between and detailing everything she found to Hopper when she came back out. Each time in, she went after a specific target Hopper was interested in, trying to plan their attack. He was careful in how he asked, generally allowing her to take the lead on which things she wanted to go after and always reassuring her she could stop any time she wanted. The last thing he wanted was to drag her mind back to memories of the lab, sent out on missions against her will under threat of punishment if she refused. He had little cause to worry, though; every time she came out, she was eager to dive right back in, ready to dig out every detail she thought could help. Papa had trained her well and she intended to use every ounce of her skill to stop him once and for all.

By alternating between Twelve and Brenner, Eleven managed to pin down a number of key locations on the map. Among a quiet street of identical homes was the little white house the two of them shared. Near the middle of the base, Brenner's office. Along much of the south and east fence-line was a rutted dirt road for base security to keep an eye on things. It was here that Twelve took a lengthy afternoon run before heading back to the house for dinner. Near the south border of the base, not far from the end of the runway, the small warehouse where Kali was being held; still bound to the same chair where she had been during Eleven's visit early that morning.

When Twelve left the warehouse for her run, Eleven kept her focus

for a short time on the two guards watching over the entrance. Once the girl in the red tracksuit was off into the woods and out of sight, they relaxed a little and grumbled about how much they despised being assigned this particular security detail.

"That girl scares the shit out of me," one of them admitted.

"Doesn't help that she can snap your neck if you look at her wrong," the other added. "The worst is how fast she snaps back to little miss sweetheart as soon as the old man is around."

"All I know is, I'm down to 18 more days before I get rotated out to a new detail and she's someone else's problem," the first guard concluded.

Hopper was thrilled to hear this, as it meant Brenner and the girl weren't surrounded by hand-picked loyalists like they had been back in Hawkins. Instead, his work was begrudgingly guarded by soldiers who felt he had no business carrying out his work on their base. "That might make our job a lot easier," he thought to himself with no small sense of satisfaction.

As the afternoon wore on, Mike found himself feeling like the third wheel of the operation, relegated to a world of sandwiches, crackers and coffee as Eleven made her observations and Hopper took his detailed notes. Still, he did his best to remind himself that he was fortunate to have been included at all; at any of a dozen points in the last day, Hopper could have booted him from the car, or stranded him at the airport, and he would have been out of things entirely. He also realized that, aside from taking detailed notes every time she came back from her scouting, Hopper wasn't doing a tremendous amount either. This was really Eleven's moment to shine, so Mike contented himself with being there for her, snacks at the ready and a shoulder to rest on each time she came back. He hoped he would prove more useful when the time came to actually devise a plan; his years of D&D campaign planning couldn't have been all for nothing.

Mike also couldn't shake the feeling Hopper had another, unspoken, reason for including him in his escape plans. Hopper loved his daughter with all his heart and would gladly lay down his life to protect her. If that happened, he needed someone he could trust to

get her to safety and someone strong enough to be there for her. Mike was fairly certain he had proven himself worthy of the responsibility, though he hoped it would never come to that.

Eleven finally decided it was time for a break when Papa and Twelve sat down to dinner, realizing she was getting rather hungry herself. She briefed Hopper on Brenner's pre-dinner activities in his office at home while Mike fixed her another sandwich.

"He was going through a stack of folders about new kids. I think he is trying to start over." She was sickened at the thought of a whole new round of children facing the horrors of his twisted experiments. "He seemed frustrated at the information, though. I don't think he has found any promising leads yet." she added.

"Thanks," Hopper said, gratefully. "You've found a lot this afternoon. I think we're in a good spot to start figuring out a plan. Anything else?"

"Yeah," she added with a grin, accepting the sandwich from Mike. "They're having pork chops and wild rice for dinner. Apparently my sister can cook, too."

"Are you saying my sandwiches leave something to be desired?" Mike asked teasingly, as he sat down next to her. He put an arm around her back and pulled her in close.

"Never," she answered with a giggle, taking a big bite to prove her point.

After dinner, they took a break from intelligence gathering and watched the evening news and a gameshow on the room's finicky black and white TV. As they watched, settled back on the beds, Eleven couldn't help but recall her day following Papa and Twelve around the desert. In particular, she worried over the chastisement he aimed at her at the end of the day. She still couldn't decide if he had truly known she was there or not. All afternoon today, she had been watching him closely for signs he knew she was there, but found none. If he had sensed her presence, he hid it well.

A little before nine o'clock, as Mike and Hopper started getting ready for bed, she grabbed the blindfold for one more look. Before either of

them could object, she pushed her mind out, locking easily onto Twelve, right where she expected she would be. Settled into bed, Twelve sat waiting for Papa to come tuck her in. Eleven puzzled over the two sides of the girl that seemed to exist. Whenever she was close to Papa, though not even in the same room, she seemed like a sweet, innocent child much younger than her 14 years. Apart from him, however, she was apparently angry and terrifying enough than trained soldiers are afraid of her. Eleven couldn't help but worry that even by Papa's side, if he were threatened, the fierce warrior would emerge and make getting to him that much more dangerous.

As if on cue, Papa entered her room, and they began the nightly routine she had witnessed on her last bedtime visit. Once more, words of praise and a kiss on the head. Once more, the playful game with the light switch. Once more, he told her he loved her. Eleven could feel her hands - her real ones back in the motel - clenching into tight fists. It didn't matter how many times she reminded herself it was just lies to get better performance from the girl, it still sent stabbing pains through her heart to hear her Papa say those three words. As bitterly as she hated the man, some part of her could not help still feeling love for the silver-haired monster standing in her sister's doorway.

She ripped the blindfold from her eyes and brought herself back to the reality of the motel room. She looked around quickly as she tried to compose herself again, not wanting to explain being upset by what she saw. Mike was still in the bathroom brushing his teeth and getting changed, and Hopper was sitting in a chair, alternating between reviewing the notes he had taken during the afternoon and looking at the corresponding locations on the map. By the time she reached over to switch off the radio static, she had settled her breathing enough to not raise suspicions as Hopper turned to look at her.

"Find anything interesting?" he asked.

"Not really," she answered, as nonchalantly as she could. "He's just tucking her into bed."

"Hmm," Hopper muttered, turning back to his notes.

Minutes later, with the lights out in the silent motel room, Eleven nestled herself deep in Mike's warm embrace. She was rapidly coming to the decision that they couldn't just go in and rescue Kali; they were going to have to deal with Papa once and for all as well. The complication to that, which kept her mind active long into the night, was what to do with her sister. She was extremely dangerous, particularly away from Papa, but at the same time, she was an innocent victim of his brainwashing. She finally decided she had to talk about it with Mike; he always knew how to help her sort out her feelings. That would be a matter for tomorrow, she thought, reveling in his comforting presence by her side. She realized, with a smile, this escape mission they were on was the longest time she had been able to be with him since that very first week he found her. Leaning up to plant a quick kiss on his cheek, she nestled deeper in his arms and finally succumbed to sleep.

24. The Trap is Sprung

The Trap is Sprung

Tacoma, WA

June 24, 1986

The next morning, while Eleven showered, Hopper pulled Mike aside for a serious discussion.

"In your bag, there should be a black zippered jacket. Grab that and come over here," he instructed.

As Mike dug out the jacket and walked over to where Hopper was sitting with his own bag, he watched him pull out what looked like several belts wound together.

"Okay, so here's the deal," he began. "I'll explain more once Jane is dressed and out here too, but the short version is: I'm going out for a bit this morning. Here, put your arms out."

Mike did as Hopper instructed and lifted his arms as he slipped slipped two loops of the belts over Mike's arms. Only as Hopper started adjusting the straps to fit, did Mike realize what he was putting on him.

"A shoulder holster?" he asked, curious why Hopper thought it necessary.

"Yeah, that's right," he confirmed. "Look, I'm going to be gone for a couple hours. You two are going to sit here in the room, bored out of your minds. Jane's going to be worrying about me, and you're going to reassure her I'm fine. I'm certain nothing at all is going to happen during that time. And when it turns out I am completely wrong, you two are going to have to take off on foot and get yourselves out of here. Having the gun tucked out of sight under your jacket is going to make things a lot simpler than if it were right there on your waist for all the world to see."

"Makes sense," Mike agreed.

"Okay, how's that feel?" Hopper asked, finishing with the adjustments.

Mike flexed his arms back and forth and rolled his shoulders. "Feels good, I think."

"Alright, this goes with you then," he said, pulling the revolver from the holster on his waist and slipping it into the one under Mike's left arm. "Under your other arm, there's enough rounds for two reloads. Now, jacket on. However hot it gets today, you keep that jacket on, got it? If something happens, you're going to have to move fast and you can't be leaving that behind."

Mike zipped the jacket shut and checked his reflection in the mirrored door of the closet. Knowing what he was looking for, he could only just make out the bulge on his left side. However, he was satisfied that someone who didn't know he had a holstered weapon there wouldn't suspect anything. Turning back to face Hopper, he found the man making his own visual inspection of the concealment before nodding his own approval.

"Look, while we have a minute," Hopper began, "I want to thank you. For a lot of things. For starters, I've never really thanked you for rescuing her from the woods and keeping her safe and hidden three years ago. I hate to think about what would have happened if you hadn't ignored my orders and gone out there that night looking for Will. You've always been there for her, without question or a second thought and I can't ever thank you enough for that. I know this past month has been more than a little crazy and this last week even more so. I don't know if we would have made it through all this without you."

Mike was a little surprised at Hopper's outpouring and wasn't quite sure how to respond. "You're welcome. It's no secret how much I love her, and I'll always be there for her, whatever she needs. And that includes whatever you need for her."

"I don't have any idea what is going to happen in the next few days but I feel a lot better knowing she has you. If the worst happens, I

need you to promise me you'll do whatever you can to get her out of here."

Mike nodded. "I know I have no way to force her to leave, but I promise I'll do everything I can to get her out and keep her safe."

A few minutes later Eleven emerged from the bathroom to join the others for breakfast. As a change of pace from the night before, they dined on cold, un-toasted, peanut butter toast. Hopper vowed to himself he would figure out how to improve their food situation while he was out. As breakfast wrapped up, Hopper laid out his plan for the morning.

"Jane, you got us amazing information last night," he complemented, coaxing a smile to her face. "So we know Kali is being held here," indicating the location on the map, "in the warehouse near the south fence line and that Twelve likes to go for runs along there. Now we need to know how often security drives along that road checking for intrusions and how hard the fence is going to be to cross or go through."

Eleven started to reach for the blindfold when Hopper stopped her with a raised hand.

"Not this time. I need to see the fence line for myself and figure out what we're up against," he explained.

"Oh, okay," she said, fighting to keep the apprehension out of her voice.

"I'll be out for a few hours and be back by lunchtime, and then we can sit down and plan how we are going to do this. In the meantime, you guys can kick back and relax and try to pretend that life is anything close to normal. When I come back, I can pick us up something other than sandwiches. How about pizza? Or I could get some Chinese takeout?"

At the thought of a quiet morning with Mike and a return to normal food, Eleven brightened a little. "Sweet and sour chicken?" she asked.

"Sure, whatever you want." Hopper said with a laugh. "I saw there

was a little place next door. I'll pick that up on my way back."

After taking a few minutes to get ready, Hopper pulled out his wallet and removed most of the cash, keeping only \$40 for himself. "Here, divide this between your two wallets. Just in case," he added.

As he stood by the door, pulling on his shoes, he shot Mike a look that summed up their earlier talk: keep her safe, at all costs. Eleven wrapped Hopper in a tight hug, afraid to let him leave the room, but understanding he had to go.

"I'll be okay. I love you, Jane" he comforted.

"I love you too, Daddy. Please be safe."

"I will," he said, giving her hair a quick ruffle, eliciting a small smile as he turned and headed out the door.

Eleven quickly locked the door behind him and walked back over to the bed, sitting down in a daze.

"Mike. Tell me he is going to be okay," she ordered, more harshly than she intended as she fought back a rising panic. He started to object, but she cut him off and continued, more gently. "I know you can't promise it. I just need to hear you say it. I can tell in your voice if you believe what you are saying or not."

Placing a hand on each of her shoulders and gently turning her so she was facing him straight on, Mike looked deep into her eyes. "He's going to be okay," he said. "Hopper is careful; probably more so than either of us. He knows what he's doing and he's not going to take any unnecessary risks."

She studied his face closely for any signs that he didn't believe what he was saying and found none. "Thank you," she said softly, wrapping her arms around him and nuzzling her face into his neck. "I just needed to hear you say it."

As he held her, she ran her fingers slowly down his back, then stopped and pulled back in confusion. "What is that?" she asked, still feeling at the unfamiliar straps crossing his back.

Realizing she had discovered the holster, Mike unzipped his jacket partway down and held it to the side. "He insisted I keep it on me at all times until he gets back. Just in case."

In all their frantic travels over the last couple days, she had only been vaguely aware of the gun being passed off to Mike when Hopper had left them to check into the motels. At the time, she had assumed it was simply so he wouldn't be carrying it into the motel offices and raising concerned questions. The real reason behind the handoff now dawned on her, "So you can keep me safe." The guilt began to seep back into her mind; she was putting the ones she loved in danger.

Zippering up his jacket, Mike put his arms around her shoulders and leaned his forehead against hers. "That's what we do, you and I. We keep each other safe. I still haven't finished paying you back for pulling me back up that cliff at the quarry, you know."

"Mike," she began, her voice deep with concern. "I don't want you to get hurt. I don't know what I would do if something happened to you."

"I know. And I don't want anything to happen to you either. That's why I'm here, ready to do anything to keep you safe."

Putting her hands around his waist, she slowly ran them up Mike's sides, brushing her fingers lightly across the weapon carefully concealed there. Looking up into his eyes, she asked "Do you think you could do it, if you had to?"

"Yes," he answered, soft but without hesitation. "It wouldn't be easy, I know that. It would probably haunt me forever, but if the moment came and I knew it was the only way to keep you safe, then yes, I would pull the trigger and take a life."

"I still see them sometimes, at night," she said, dropping her gaze and studying the zipper on his jacket. "The bad men I killed. I know it was what had to be done, and I would do it again if I had to. But the faces never go away."

Mike pulled her in tightly and held her until her breathing calmed. He knew her nights were often filled with horrors of her past and she

didn't like to discuss the specifics, but instead sought comfort and support until she could safely tuck the memories away again. "I'm so sorry it came down that."

After several minutes, Eleven suddenly let out a short, choking laugh. Concerned, Mike held her back and looked at her face for some explanation as to the sudden change of mood. "Look at us," she began, fighting back another giggle. "Two hormone fueled teenagers, alone in a motel room with several hours to kill. And what are we doing? Sitting around talking about arming up for a showdown and whether we could live with taking a life if necessary."

Mike had to admit, it sounded rather ridiculous and joined her in laughing at their situation. Sharing a bed the last few nights, he had to admit there were more than a few times he had wished for Hopper to take off somewhere for a few hours. Without warning, she flung herself sideways on the bed, pulling him down with her, their heads falling side by side on the pillows. She pressed her lips firmly to his, and then followed up with a gentler, much longer kiss. He gently stroked his fingers up her side, as she traced small circles on his chest.

"When was the last time we were really alone together?" he asked when they finally separated to catch their breath. It seemed even at times where they were alone, Hopper was always somewhere nearby, ready to check on them without warning.

She furled her brow for a moment, trying to recall when it might have been, when it suddenly hit her. "Last day of spring break?" she giggled.

"That was it," Mike smiled, blushing slightly at the memory. It had all been innocent enough; they had only been laying on her bed kissing. Clothes were on and their hands remained in respectable locations. Still, they had both suffered minor heart attacks when Hopper's Blazer suddenly turned down the driveway. The chief had decided to take a long lunch and surprise her with burgers as a treat before school resumed. Mike had been forced to flee out her bedroom window and sneak into the woods to keep from being discovered.

"You almost broke your leg falling out my window," she giggled. "And

then you almost got us caught when you insisted on leaning back in for one more kiss. He never said anything, but I don't think Daddy ever believed that I had my window wide open for fresh air when it was barely 45 degrees out."

She leaned forward for another kiss, then lay back and studied every feature of his face. Slowly, the smile on her face began to fall, a question forming in her mind. "He is going to be okay, right?"

"I hope so. Do you want to check on him?" Mike offered.

She nodded, grateful that he didn't think she was panicking, wanting to check on him so quickly. She got up from the bed to retrieve her blindfold from the dresser while Mike turned the radio on to static. Settling gently onto the bed, she pulled the blindfold down over her eyes and pushed her mind out in search of Hopper. A wave of relief washed over her when she found him, parked along the road south of the base. Everything looked quiet around the car, as he sat observing the fence and the rutted dirt road running just inside. Hoping to further calm her rising nerves, she decided to push further and seek out Papa and Twelve as well. As was almost always the case, she found Papa seated at his desk, reading through still more reports. Twelve was once again down near the warehouse, taking another run on the countless dirt roads crisscrossing through the forests on base.

She pulled the cover from her eyes and brought her mind back into the reality of the motel room once more. A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

"So, how is he?" Mike asked, already surmising the answer from her expression.

"He's okay," she confirmed. "Parked along the fence just watching."

They sat in silence for a few minutes, as Mike watched her face while she tried to put into words the thoughts that had been running through her mind for the last month. Finally, she dove in, knowing Mike was good at following her disjointed thoughts. "I think we have to stop Papa for good. He can't keep taking more kids, but I don't know if I'm strong enough to stop him. If the moment came, I don't know if I have the strength to kill him."

Mike studied her face and knew it had nothing to do with being physically strong enough to stop him.

"When I've watched him with Twelve, at bedtime, he hugs her and tells her he loves her and for some reason, it makes my heart hurt. It feels like the day I saw you in the gym at school with Max, just so angry and sad that someone has this connection that I want so badly for myself. I spent twelve years wishing Papa would hug me, that I was good enough for him to tell me he loved me. Instead he has been giving all his love to my sister. I know Papa is a bad man, and a liar, but deep in my heart I still want to make him proud of me. I hate him, I really do. Mike, I hate him, but I think I still love Papa, too."

She looked down at her hands folded in her lap, ashamed at her confused feelings for the monster who had twisted her mind from her earliest memories. Ashamed that she felt love for someone who had never shown an ounce of love to her in return. Ashamed at what Mike must think of her, for loving someone so terrible.

His heart breaking for her confused turmoil, Mike quickly pulled her into his lap and wrapped his arms firmly around her. He planted a soft kiss to her forehead then leaned his head against hers.

"I understand," he began, reassuringly. "From your earliest memories, he was all you had. A part of you will probably always love him, and there's nothing wrong with you for feeling that way. For good or bad, he was the closest thing to a father you had growing up. I know my dad was nowhere close to Brenner, but I understand loving someone who only gives indifference in return; you want to forget they exist but they are forever a part of you."

Eleven looked up into Mike's eyes, seeing the hurt brought on by thinking about his own father. She had experienced the indifference of Ted Wheeler on her countless visits to the house; each time he looked as though he were meeting her for the first time. Mike had told her about the fight he had with his father over dinner while she was in the hospital and she had felt so proud that he would stand up for her honor like that.

"I'm sure if the moment came and it was the only choice, you would be able to stop him," Mike continued. "I agree he can't be allowed to

go on with his work, but we might be able to find another way. After we get Kali out, and get somewhere safe, maybe we can expose what he's been doing and shut him down that way. Like how Nancy and Jonathan got the lab shut down once and for all."

She smiled at the suggestion, hoping there would be option that didn't leave more people dead. There had been too much death that fell in her wake as she moved through life. As much as Mike reassured her those deaths weren't her fault and as much as she believed him, the bodies were still there, forever tied to her. Even the lives she took herself, knowing it was the only way to keep herself and those she cared about safe, stacked painfully in her mind. Laying her head down against his chest, she closed her eyes and soaked in the feeling of his strong arms wrapped protectively around her.

She lost track of how long they sat like that, wrapped comfortably around one another, but neither wanted to be anywhere else in that moment. Only as the clock approached lunch did they begin to wonder where Hopper was and how much longer he might be.

"Want to check on him again?" Mike offered.

She nodded her agreement quickly and picked up the blindfold from where it lay next to the radio. Switching on the static, she settled into Mike's arms and pulled the cover over her eyes. She had found him so many times out in the In-Between, she could practically do it just shutting her eyes. Mike watched the look of concentration form on her face as she pushed out in her search. After several minutes, the corners of her mouth began to pull down into a concerned frown.

"Daddy?" she whispered, confused.

"Daddy?" she said again, voice rising in concern. She began to tremble in his arms, and Mike tightened his reassuring hold around her.

Suddenly she pulled the blindfold down from her eyes, her face awash in panic. "Mike, I can't find him!"

"Shhh," he soothed. "Hold on. Let's try again."

She looked deep in his eyes and nodded, trying to bring her breathing under control again.

"Let's do this right; maybe I was distracting you," Mike offered.

Sliding off his lap, she settled cross-legged in the middle of the bed. Mike turned the volume up on the radio, blocking out the muffled noises of the city outside.

Just before she pulled the blindfold back on, Mike added "If you still can't find him, see if you can still find Kali."

She nodded and pushed her mind outward again in search of Hopper. Mike had a good idea what was happening, but wanted to know for sure before they made a move.

Minutes later, she pulled the blindfold back off, tears brimming at the corners of her eyes. "Mike, I can't find either one of them. They aren't anywhere. Mike, what if they're...." she let the thought trail off, unable to bring herself to finish. If she couldn't find them, did that mean they were dead?

"They're not dead," Mike said, guessing at her fear and pulling her close, already planning what they had to do. Locking eyes and ensuring she was following what he was saying, Mike went on. "Remember with Barb? She was already dead, and had been for several days, but you were still able to find her. In the Upside-Down, no less. No, if you can't find them, it means that Brenner doesn't want you to see them right now."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

"We all agreed when we left Chicago that he was probably setting some kind of trap, trying to lure you out into the open. I think it is safe to assume that somehow Hopper sprung the trap and Brenner has him now. If I had to guess, he is probably tied to a chair right alongside Kali as we speak. He may have had your dad for a couple hours at this point, so we have to move quickly and get everything packed up."

At that, Mike released Eleven from his arms, crossed the room and

began to take down the map and notes from where they were taped on the wall. After tossing Hopper's duffle bag on the table, Mike began to fold the documents into a neat stack and slide them into the bag along with the notepads. Turning to assess the room, Mike noticed Eleven was still sitting on the bed, watching him with puzzlement.

"El, we have to get packed and out of here. Brenner could already know where we are. I promised Hopper if anything happened to him, I would get you out of here and get you somewhere safe."

"Mike..." she started, her voice dripping with hurt. How could Mike be planning to run and just leave him behind?

Realizing he hadn't explained the plans that had been forming in his head all morning, he went over to the bed and sat beside her. She pulled back, not liking this new side of Mike's. She was grateful he would do anything to keep her safe, but if that meant leaving Daddy behind, she didn't want any part of it.

"El," Mike began, more reassuringly. "We're not running, and we're not leaving him behind. I mean, if you want to run, we will; it's exactly what he wants us to do. But I was careful about my wording when he made me promise. I promised I would get you out of here and get you someplace safe. I never promised we would leave him behind. We have to regroup and figure out a plan to get both of them back, but we can't stay here. I know he would never just give up your location to Brenner, but he has ways of dragging it out of him."

Eleven thought for a moment about the last time Hopper and Dr. Brenner spoke, and that had been exactly what he had done. She knew deep in her heart that Mike was right, he wouldn't do that. It had torn him apart with guilt and she believed him when he said never again. She trusted Daddy to keep her safe.

"So, we're not leaving him behind?" she asked, making sure she was understanding Mike right.

"No, El." he smiled. "We're not leaving him behind. We're going to do everything we can to get both of them out."

"Thank you," she said, throwing her arms around him.

"We do have to get moving though, just in case," he added urgently.

Reassured, she hopped up from the bed and began gathering clothes and tooth brushes and adding them back to the bags. They threw the last of the food back into a grocery bag and set that on the bed next to the two duffles and made one final sweep of the room, ensuring they had gathered everything.

"Okay, now the part I haven't figured out yet," Mike began. "I'm not sure where to have us go. I know there were a couple other motels further back up the road, but I'm not sure that is far enough. And we'll be pretty exposed walking down the sidewalk with two big black bags."

Peeking around the curtain and surveying the parking lot, Eleven asked "A car?"

Mike gave a laugh. "Hopper has ours, and I don't know the first thing about hot-wiring someone else's car."

Eleven grinned. "Back in the cabin, I used to start Daddy's Blazer on cold mornings, so it would be warm by the time he walked out to it."

"Have I told you how amazing you are?" Mike asked.

Her cheeks flushed light pink at the compliment. "Okay, so which one do we take?" she asked.

Mike looked around the lot and was disappointed to find it mostly empty, given that it was the middle of the day. Reluctantly, he settled on a gray station wagon two rooms down.

"How about that one?" he asked.

She nodded, "Want me to start it now?"

"Yeah, why don't you start it and get it unlocked, and then we'll wait a minute to make sure the owner doesn't come out."

Moments later, he heard the engine turn over and purr to life.

Thankfully, it was a nondescript engine that likely wouldn't catch the attention of its owner. Gathering the bags by the door while they waited, Mike pulled her into a warm embrace and kissed her once more.

"Whatever happens, I love you," he said.

"I love you too." she smiled. "Ready?"

"Ready," he agreed.

Poking his head out and checking that the coast was clear, Mike nodded and they walked quickly over to the idling station wagon. Opening the passenger door, Mike climbed in, tossing his bag into the back seat as he slid across and sat behind the wheel. Eleven followed, tossing her own bag over the seat with both hands as she reached out with her mind and pulled the door shut behind her. Mike threw the car into reverse and backed carefully out of the parking space, drove through the lot and pulled out onto the road. Having studied the map thoroughly while Eleven was scouting for information the night before, Mike decided to head south-east of the base to where the suburbs gave way to more rural woodlands in hopes of finding a place to hide once the car was inevitably reported stolen.

"So what now?" Eleven asked.

"Now, we wait," Mike replied. "Right now, Brenner is going to be waiting for us to come charging in to the rescue and fall right into whatever trap he ultimately has laid for you. Until he lets you see them again, and we can figure out what he has planned, we have to sit and wait."

She nodded and pulled the blindfold out of her pocket, twisting the cloth in her fingers. It would be a very long night of checking and waiting until Papa decided to let her see them.

Dr. Martin Brenner sat at his desk, immensely pleased with himself. His plan was going far better than he ever could have dreamed. It had been a lucky break when Eight showed up on his front porch. Dangling her as bait had paid off and he managed to catch a bigger fish, that police chief who had been the key to his undoing in

Hawkins. Now, he was prepped as bait to pull in the true prize. By this time tomorrow, Eleven would be his once more. Oh, she wouldn't come willingly, he was quite sure of that, but if it came down to saving the ones she loved, she would come to him all the same.

"Twelve, you did splendidly today." he said to the girl sitting across from him, intently cleaning fresh blood from one of her knives. She looked up with a proud smile on her face.

"How about dinner out tonight?" he offered.

"Chinese?" she asked, hopefully.

"Sure, why not," he agreed.

There was a little place just north of the base they went to once and a while for a special dinner out. It wasn't in the greatest neighborhood, tucked right next to a questionable motel, but they had the best sweet and sour chicken in the city. It was Twelve's favorite, and she had certainly earned it.

25. Under the Fence

Under the Fence

Tacoma, WA

June 25, 1986

Eleven woke to the sound of birds chirping and early morning sunshine filtering its way through the trees. She was curled up against Mike's side and his arms were tightly around her, holding her close. Finding that the backseat of the station wagon folded flat had been a welcome relief, as was the old wool blanket they had found in the back. Had the night not consisted of waking every hour and checking to see if Papa had let her see Daddy again, it would have been one of the best ways she could imagine waking up. As it was, she only felt guilt at the brief moment of happiness as the fog of the night cleared out of her mind.

Pulling the blindfold over her eyes, she pushed her mind out and ran through her list of checks once again. Daddy? Nothing to be found. Kali? Just the same. Papa? At his desk with a mug of coffee. Twelve? Fixing breakfast: scrambled eggs and sausage.

Anger grew inside her as she came to the realization that they were casually going about their day, just waiting her out. They were confident she wouldn't make a move until they showed Daddy to her again, so they could enjoy a morning of leisure at home while she and Mike huddled together for warmth, tucked up an old dirt road and away from prying eyes that may be on the lookout for the stolen car. Neither being all that hungry but knowing it would be their last chance at hot food for a while, Mike had taken them through a McDonalds drive-thru yesterday afternoon. They knew that by this morning, the car would certainly have been reported stolen and they would have to stay out of sight until they were ready to make their move.

Slipping quietly out of Mike's arms, careful not to wake him, Eleven climbed out of the car to stretch and relieve herself behind a nearby

tree. It had been an uncomfortable experience the first time she ever had to pee outdoors, but after her month in the wild, she had grown quite used to it. Coming back toward the car, she hungrily eyed several large birds settled on a nearby branch. That was something else a month on her own had taught her, but ultimately she decided they couldn't risk the fire it would take to cook them. With a resigned sigh, she climbed back into the car where Mike was sitting with his back to her, preparing a breakfast out of what little was left of their food.

Turning to pass her a paper towel, with a smile he said, "I know it's not the same, but here."

She looked down at the treat he had prepared for her. After spreading peanut butter on a slice of bread, he had trimmed the whole thing into a circle and carefully carved a waffle-pattern into the spread. It wasn't an Eggo, but at that moment, it was even better.

Her face broke into a huge smile as she leaned forward and kissed him. "Thank you. Have I told you how sweet you are?"

"You might have," he teased. "But you could always tell me again, just to be safe."

"Don't push it," she grinned, swiping a dollop of peanut butter on her finger and tapping the end of his nose.

They ate in relative silence, listening to the morning sounds of the woods around them. Soon enough, it was time for Eleven to make her rounds again, checking on who she could find. Pulling the well-used blindfold down over her eyes, she pushed her mind out to begin searching. In mere seconds, Hoppers face began to pull into focus.

"Daddy?" she whispered into darkness in startled concern.

There he was, as Mike had predicted, bound to a chair of his own right next to Kali. His face was splotchy with bruises and one eye was nearly swollen shut. Deep cuts wound their way up both arms. His head hung limply forward, his chin resting on his chest. She pulled her focus back to inspect the rest of the scene. Twelve stood before him, pacing menacingly back and forth, glaring at him.

"Where do you have her hidden?" she growled.

When he didn't respond, she reached out a hand and his head flew up from his chest until he was looking her squarely in the eyes. "I asked you a question. Where is she?"

Hopper spat a mouthful of blood before he spoke, revealing several missing teeth. "Fuck you. I already told you, she's not here."

Brenner stepped into view then.

"Come now, Chief. Oh, I'm sorry. Mr. Roberts. Let's not play games. I may not have the resources I once did, but I still have people who know how to find things. Monday morning you arrived at the airport in Chicago under the guise of the Roberts family and purchased three tickets for you, your son and your daughter. Now, unless you recently got married and decided to take your wife's last name, I would put my money squarely on your children being Eleven and Mike Wheeler."

He stalked closer, getting right in Hopper's face. "Now I'll make this simple. Tell me where Eleven is, and this can all be over. Give me my girl, and I'll patch you up and put you and the boy on the next flight home, and you'll never hear from us again. Really Mr. Hopper, this went so much easier last time. You were so eager to give her away, you practically delivered her to me wrapped in a bow."

Hopper strained against his restraints and spat a fresh mouth of blood into the old man's face.

"Very well. I've tried to be reasonable. Twelve, please help persuade our guest."

With a gleam of joy in her eyes, the girl stepped forward again. Standing before the chair, never taking her eyes off Hopper's, she reached out with her mind and undid the restraints holding his right arm to the chair. Before he could move a muscle, she pulled the arm straight out to the side. He could guess what was coming, but was powerless to stop it.

"Where is my sister, Mr. Hopper?"

When he didn't answer, she gave a slight flick of her head, and his upper arm suddenly bent over, the bone shattering with a sickening snap. He let out a deep howl of pain.

As calm as ever, "Where is Eleven, Mr. Hopper?"

"Never," he growled.

With another flick, she snapped the bones in his forearm, delighted at the renewed howl of pain it elicited.

"Really now, this can all stop if you just tell me where she is." she said, beginning to lose her cool.

Looking deep into her eyes, reminding himself this was not his own little girl he was facing, he twisted his mouth into a grotesque smile, blood drooling out of the limp corner of his mouth. "You will NEVER find her."

In a scream of rage, she wrenched his arm around, twisting his hand up in front of his face and folded all five fingers the wrong way around to the back of his hand. The pain was excruciating but Hopper was beyond caring. Through gritted teeth he stared hard at the girl and never uttered a sound.

Realizing Twelve was on the verge of snapping and possibly killing his only leverage, Brenner stepped forward, placing a calming hand on her shoulder. "I think that's enough for now. Let's give our friend a little while to think about things."

Her face instantly calming, she backed away and smiled sweetly, "Yes Papa."

Knowing Hopper's arm was now useless, Brenner left it unbound as he and Twelve walked toward the door of the warehouse, shutting off the lights as they went.

Eleven ripped the blindfold from her eyes, breathless at what she has seen. Her face was beyond sadness or anger; only raw hatred burned through her. Her eyes practically glowed a fierce red as she turned to look at Mike. It was a face he had seen only once before and it had almost killed her then. She had pushed him away when he tried to

help her that time - threw him, really - but he wasn't about to let her face her anger alone again. As she made a move for the back door, Mike threw his arms around her and pulled her tight to him.

"Let me go," she growled. "I have to stop him."

"We will, but not like this," he protested, straining as she fought against his hold. He knew some part of her mind was still holding on to rationality; she could have easily flung him off her and through the back window of the car at any moment if she wanted.

"I have to stop him. Papa's going to kill him." Her resolve began to break as the tears started to fall, her eyes softening to the beautiful brown of the girl he fell in love with that very first night in the rain. "Mike, please."

"We'll go. Right now," he assured her. "I need you to tell me everything you saw. I have to know what we are facing."

As they climbed into the front seat, she started the engine for him and began recounting the interrogation as she had witnessed it.

"He's trying to draw you out with your dad's pain. Can you think of what he might be planning as a trap once you get there?" Mike asked as they started back toward the main road.

"I don't know," she said, wracking her brain, trying think of anything he might be able to use against her. "Papa never taught me about traps, he only showed me how to spy on people."

"If we're lucky," Mike theorized, "he's counting on Twelve being able to stop you. If what you've seen is any indication, I think you're strong enough to overpower her. But there's a problem with that, too. If your sister is anything like you, her power is going to run off the charts if someone she loves is threatened."

Mike glanced over as she undid her seatbelt and slid across to the middle seat, belting herself in again. He put his arm around her as she curled up against his side.

"Please. Promise me you'll be okay," she said, softly.

Mike looked down into her pleading eyes, his heart breaking once more at the worry written across her beautiful face. He started to speak, but choked on the words as they formed.

"I know," she said sadly. He pulled her in tighter as they drove on, making their way back toward the south side of the base. As they had sat parked in the woods yesterday afternoon, Eleven had shown him on the map where Hopper's car had been the last time she saw him. If he had been spotted there, Mike knew they were going to have to park further off to avoid detection as they made their way through the fence and toward the warehouse.

"The dark room," Eleven suddenly blurted out, sitting up so fast Mike had to fight to not jerk the steering wheel to one side.

"What?" he asked in total confusion.

"Back in the lab. When I was bad, Papa would put me in the dark room. When I was in there, I couldn't send my mind out to find him, or anyone else. He has to be doing the same thing with where he is keeping them now."

Mike thought about it for a minute. It would certainly explain how he had been able to keep her from finding them all night, until he was ready for her to witness something that would throw her into a frenzy.

"If the room could block your powers, and that's what he's built here, you can't go in there," Mike cautioned.

Eleven grinned, "Papa didn't know it didn't block all my powers. I couldn't see out, or get the door open for myself, but my powers worked fine inside."

Mike gave her a questioning look. She had explained the dark room to him before and how Brenner would use it to punish her for failing to live up to his expectations in one of his experiments; for being bad, he had always told her. The explanations always left him seething in anger at the true monster of Hawkins.

"One time, one of Papa's helpers dropped a pencil when they were

throwing me in the room. I would play with it while I sat there in the dark, spinning it gently in the air. Seeing how far I could bend it without breaking it. When Papa would finally come to take me back to my room, I would hide the pencil behind the rubber moulding at the bottom of the wall."

To hear her tell it, the experience sounded like any other childhood game. There were times Mike worried she still didn't grasp the full extent of how terrible Brenner had been to her growing up, and maybe it was better that way. If her mind wanted to shelter her just a little bit, she had certainly earned it.

"If he never saw you doing it, you might be right that he would underestimate you now. If he thinks you'll be powerless inside the building, he might let his guard down enough to get all of us out safely."

Eleven smiled and settled back into his side to rest while they drove. She had slept little the night before and knew she would need all her strength soon, whatever Papa had planned for them. Soon enough, they arrived at the place Mike had picked out on the map. They were down what looked to be a long-disused service road running along the public side of the fence where, with luck, the car would sit undiscovered until they had made their way to the warehouse and back. That posed the next problem he had yet to solve. The original spot Hopper had picked out, while more exposed, was also less than a half mile from the building where he was now being held captive. From here, it was closer to three, though much of it was thankfully still wooded.

"So, what now?" she asked, concern growing in her voice as the gravity of the situation began to sink in.

"Well," Mike began, forming a plan as he went, "Step one, we need to get past the fence. That razor-wire along the top will cut us up pretty bad if we try to go over, but the ground is pretty uneven along here so I'm hoping we can find a way under instead. Then, we start toward the warehouse. The woods will keep us concealed pretty good along the way, but I'm still not sure what to do once we get out in the open."

Eleven looked at Mike and then down at her own clothes and began to see what he meant. Her bright pink shirt and jeans were a dead giveaway that she didn't belong alone on a military base. Mike's black jacket wasn't quite as obvious, but even then, together they still looked like two kids wandering someplace they didn't belong.

"I figure we just take the first step, and then the next, and keep going," he continued. "It's like learning to dance, we'll figure it out together, right?"

She smiled and nodded, memories of the Snow Ball flashing through her mind. "Let's dance."

Locking the doors of the car, they took off on foot along the fence, looking for a place they could squeeze their way under. Not far along, they found a gap where several animals - coyotes Mike guessed - had dug a fairly large gap under the chain link. It would be a tight fit, but Mike was pretty sure they could make it.

"Want to go first or second?" he asked, unsure if either option was any better than the other. Really, he didn't want them stranded on opposite sides of the fence if anything happened.

"You first," she decided.

"Alright, here goes," he said as he crouched down and inspected the gap, trying to determine how best to go about it. Finally, not wanting to get hung up on the fence and not be able to see his way free, he lay down and began to slide on his back, headfirst under the fence. The gap proved to be just big enough to squeeze himself through, though he scraped his cheek pretty hard on a sharp end of the stiff wire as his head passed under. Pulling himself to his feet on the other side, he brushed away the dirt and waited for Eleven to start under.

After seeing Mike slice his cheek - much worse than he had realized so far - Eleven decided to try crossing under the fence on her stomach instead. She had made it just passed the halfway point when she raised her back a little too high and her shirt snagged on the same sharp wires. Shifting a hand around to free herself, she raised up higher and poked one wire hard into her back. Dropping flat with a yelp of surprise, she was relieved to find Mike immediately at her

side, freeing her shirt from the tangle. Helping to pull with one hand, while guiding her clothes around the wires with the other, he helped bring her the rest of the way under the fence and up to her feet.

Brushing away the dirt and leaves that now coated her face and the front of her cloths, she looked up shyly at Mike.

"Still pretty," he smiled, reaching up to free a small stick that was tangled in her hair.

"You're bleeding," she said, reaching up to wipe the trickle of blood from his cheek and then pulled his lips to hers. "So, where to now?"

"I have an idea, but it takes us a little out of the way," he began. He hesitated, hating to have to make his next request. "We would need you to use your powers. I hate to ask it, but I think it might be our best chance."

"Mike, it's okay," she assured him. "I know if you're asking me to use them, it's something important and not selfish like Papa."

"Okay," he said with some relief. "I'm thinking we should stick to this road along the fence for a little ways rather than cutting straight across through the woods. I think security patrols must come along here pretty frequently and if you can stop one of their trucks, we could get their uniforms and take the truck. We'd get there quicker in the end, and blend in along the way."

She thought about it for a minute and nodded. "Good plan," she finally said, settling the matter.

They started walking along the road in the general direction of the warehouse, sticking close to the edge and listening for approaching engines so they could hide quickly when the time came. After a few minutes of walking, Eleven began to lose herself in the peaceful calm around them and intertwined her fingers into Mike's. She knew there were terrible things waiting ahead for them and she was determined to remember and enjoy every detail about this moment while it lasted. The soft feel of his fingers in hers. The warm sunshine on their faces. The soft chirping of the birds in the trees around them. The soft crunch of the dirt under their feet as they walked.

All too soon, the sound of an approaching engine broke the stillness around them and they dove for cover in the bushes along the road. Waiting until the truck was about to pass by them, Eleven reached out and pulled a wire off the engine, bringing the vehicle to a halt. After trying unsuccessfully to get the engine running again the two soldiers inside climbed out and raised the hood, trying to assess what had gone wrong. Not wanting to hurt them for simply having the misfortune of being the first to drive past, Eleven decided to try and reach into their minds and gently knock them out. She reached out to the driver first and visualized pushing her own mind into his. It proved remarkably easy and by some new-found instinct, she quickly found what she was looking for.

Mike watched in amazement as first the driver, and seconds later the other soldier, suddenly crumpled to the ground. He looked at Eleven with concern, until she calmly said "Sleeping" and stood to walk out toward where they lay. He joined her and was relieved to see that they were, in fact, breathing calmly and lost in some deep nap. Together they carried the soldiers over to the side of the road and laid them carefully in the grass that lined the ditch. They quickly removed their dark blue shirts and pants and left them sprawled out in undershirts and boxer shorts. Standing beside the truck, Mike passed the smaller of the two uniforms to Eleven and both began to strip out of their civilian clothes. Despite his best efforts at respectability, Mike couldn't help but glance toward Eleven as she finished pulling off her jeans.

She caught his glance and laughed. "It's not like you haven't seen me in my underwear before, dork," she teased as she tossed the pants at him.

Soon enough, they were re-dressed in the borrowed uniforms. Mike inspected the results as Eleven tucked her hair up under her newly acquired hat. The outfits were certainly large on both of them, but with shirts tucked in and belts cinched tight, the look was convincing enough at a distance. Deciding the shoulder holster would be too much, Mike double checked the safety on the revolver and slid it into his pocket. Unsnapping the cover on one of the ammunition pockets, Mike pulled out a folded piece of paper and quickly slipped it into his shirt pocket, before tossing the holster on the seat of the truck. He

had found the page yesterday afternoon while double checking the pocket's contents. He had only read the first lines before realizing what it was:

Dear Jane, If you're reading this, then everything has gone wrong. I want you to know....

He had quickly folded the page and put it back where it belonged and said a quick prayer that Hopper would get the opportunity to tell her in person everything he had put in the letter.

After reconnecting the wire Eleven had pulled and slamming the hood shut, Mike climbed into the truck and fired up the engine. Eleven climbed in next to him, and off they went. As they drove, she scouted ahead so there would be no surprises. Hopper and Twelve were still in the warehouse, secured to the chairs as they had been the last time she checked. Brenner and Twelve were seated in the back of a car, driving back toward the north end of the base and away from them. Minutes later, Mike and Eleven were clear of the woods and headed straight for the warehouse. As they had hoped, the two men guarding the building's entrance never suspected a thing as they pulled up; just two more soldiers in a security truck. A momentary look of recognition flashed across one guards face, having seen Twelve often enough to recognize her from a distance. Unfortunately, that only left him further unprepared for what happened next. As with the other soldiers, Eleven reached carefully into their minds and gently knocked out the pair of guards. Mike thought the move was both beautiful and terrifying to witness and he could practically feel her strength growing as she sat beside him.

Parking the truck, they looked around quickly and assured themselves they were alone. Mike knew this could all be over, one way or another, in the next few minutes and he was ready to face it. As long as he could get her back out safely, he could make peace with whatever else happened beyond those doors.

"Ready?" he asked

In answer, she reached over and grabbed the front of his shirt, pulling his lips to hers for what she prayed wasn't the last time. "Ready."

Climbing out, Mike decided to grab the rifle and a spare magazine from their mounts in truck. If everything fell apart, sixty shots would serve them far better than the seven concealed in his pocket. After dragging the guards out of sight to avoid suspicion on the off-chance someone were to drive by, they took a deep breath, and walked through the warehouse door. As their eyes adjusted to the dim light inside, they both jumped at the firm click of the door closing behind them.

Hopper looked up in a daze and saw the girl had returned, probably to finish him off. He had made peace with that inevitability long ago and prepared himself for whatever new hell she had in mind.

"I'm never telling you where she is, so just get it over with you bitch," he spat.

"Daddy?" she cried in disbelief. His bloody, battered face was even worse in person.

"Jane?" he said, startled. For a brief moment he thought it must be some new trick devised by Brenner to get him to break and then he saw Mike, walking into view one step behind Eleven, taking in the horror laid before them in the dark and dusty warehouse.

She broke into a run and knelt by his side, quickly working to remove the restraints holding him to the chair.

"Jane, what are you doing here? Brenner could be back any time," Hopper pleaded. Then, turning an accusatory look at Mike, "I thought I told you to get her somewhere safe?"

Not even flinching at the accusation, as he knelt and worked to free Kali from her own restraints, Mike answered "I promised you I'd do everything I could to keep her safe. As soon as you went missing, we abandoned the motel room, just in case Brenner got the location out of you. I gave her the choice to run, but you and I both know there was no way she would ever leave you behind. She was coming, with or without me, so here I am. Keeping her safe."

Hopper opened his mouth to refute what he had said, but closed it without uttering a word. Once again, that wise beyond his years punk

Mike Wheeler knew exactly what he was talking about.

As he rose to his feet Eleven threw her arms around him, careful to avoid the shattered arm hanging limp at his side.

"I never thought I'd see you again," she said, tears slowly rolling down her dusty cheeks. "What happened to 'don't be stupid?'"

"Apparently your sister decided to go for a run along the border fence and she spotted me sitting there. She pried the door off the car and yanked me out and over the fence before I even saw her. Then she hit me and I woke up here." In truth, it had taken a few seconds to wrench the door free from the car's frame, but in the confusion of the moment, it all blurred into a single swift event in Hopper's mind.

"Well, we're getting out of here and I will never let her get to you again," Eleven vowed.

Remembering the original reason they had come to the base in the first place, Eleven turned to look at Kali. Mike had finished undoing her restraints and was helping her shakily to her feet.

"Jane? I'm so sorry," she began.

Stepping forward, Eleven threw her arms around Kali and pulled her into a firm embrace. "You're my sister, and I love you. I'll always come for you." Then, leaning in closer, she added in a whisper just loud enough for the two of them, "If you ever go in my mind again, I'll kill you myself."

Pulling back, she could see truth of it in Eleven's eyes. Her sister loved her, but she had crossed an unforgivable line and put everyone in danger.

Shouldering the rifle once more, Mike pulled them out of their brief reunion. "We need to get going. The guards outside, or the ones along the fence, could be waking up any time now."

As they started toward the door, no one noticed the soft beeping coming from one of the crates sitting a few feet behind the chairs.

26. Finding Safety

Finding Safety

McChord Air Force Base

Tacoma, WA

June 25, 1986

Across the base, Dr. Brenner and Twelve were busy settling into their seats on the small, white business jet he had arranged for them the previous night. He smiled to himself at how well his plan was coming together. Eight had gotten the ball rolling, providing enough incentive to get Eleven into the area. Jim Hopper had predictably wanted to keep her somewhere safe and had come to the base himself to assess the situation. Twelve had captured him with ease, having perfected similar abduction scenarios when she was nine years old. He had kept him hidden from Eleven through the night, long enough to let her start to panic, and then let her see him again, beaten and broken. And finally, he had been informed only minutes ago, that Eleven and Mike Wheeler were spotted entering the warehouse to attempt a rescue. He was impressed to hear that, despite a lack of training, they had managed to subdue four soldiers, secure a truck, a rifle and uniforms.

He cursed the thought of what she could be capable of if he had only been able to train her as planned. Putting her in the bath and sending her after the creature had been a mistake; he could admit that to himself. But they also could have contained the situation and continued their work. Instead, she betrayed him and ran away. The sisters could have been the crowning achievement of his life's work. Trained separately to nurture their individual gifts and then brought together when the time was right. They could have been an unstoppable force, the likes of which the world had never seen.

In the seat facing his, Twelve double checked her seatbelt, trying to fight back the apprehension about flying again. It was only the second time she had ever been in a plane, and while she was grateful

that Papa was safe this time and the plane was much more comfortable, the terrors of that first flight still burned bright in her mind. The rest of their things would be coming in a few days, but Papa had let her bring her bear along, which she now hugged tightly as the plane began the long taxi toward the runway.

"Papa, I don't understand why we're leaving," she began. "Why did we just let them go?"

Irritated at being pulled out of his thoughts, and doubly so that she was daring to question his plans, he looked sternly at the girl sitting across from him.

He did his best to keep the irritation from his voice as he answered. "It's a test. If she passes, it won't be safe for us here. We will need to be ready when she comes for us," he explained.

"Papa, I can take care of us. I'm strong enough, you know that. I can stop all of them," she reasoned.

"Just like you handled the tests out in the desert?" he countered, his anger rising as her insolence continued. He had recently come to realize he had given her too much free reign over things here, and it had gone to her head. Things would need to change when they were settled in their new home.

"Papa, you don't need to be scared of her, I can protect us. We're being stupid, running away like this." As soon as the words left her lips, she knew she had crossed a line. She wasn't supposed to question his plans; Papa always knew best. Worse, she was never supposed to be disrespectful and talk back to him.

With a look of fierce disappointment in his eyes, Brenner leaned forward toward the girl and slapped her once, hard across the cheek. She immediately shrank back in her seat, hugging her bear tighter and fighting back the tears that wanted so badly to fall. She no longer looked like a fierce, battle-ready warrior, but instead, just a small frightened girl. He never liked correcting her, and thankfully it was rarely necessary, but he had found early on that a physical correction was the only way to break through to her when she was bad. He had tried the dark room back in the lab, but the isolation never had the

same effect as it did on her sister. The times he had tried it, she had calmly walked to the room with her escort, sat down inside and waited patiently to be let out when her punishment was over. After today's trials were done, he would have to take a long, hard look at exactly where each girl fit into his plans.

In the warehouse, Mike finished wrapping Hopper's arm in a makeshift sling made from part of an old drop cloth he found on a shelf. Pulling Eleven and Kali out of their reunion, he announced "We need to get going. The guards outside, or the ones along the fence, could be waking up any time now."

As they made their way back toward the door, Mike can't shake the sense that it had all been too easy. After keeping Hopper hidden for almost a day, they had let him be found, shattered his arm, and then simply left. It didn't make any sense, and he knew they were probably walking right into whatever the final trap would be. Reaching out to pull the door open, Mike kept his hand on the grip the rifle, ready to raise in in defense as he braced himself to come face to face with Twelve, or Brenner, or dozens of soldiers, or all of the above. Instead, he met with resistance; the door was locked. He pulled again, just to be sure.

"We're in the trap," he said, momentarily feeling defeated.

Not ready to give up that easily, Eleven stretched out one hand and tried to pry the door open. She was shocked to find the door resisted her grasp. Trying again, she realized the feeling of resistance was familiar. She pushed her mind out further, trying to find Papa or Twelve and came back empty.

"Dark room," she said, joining in Mike's feeling of defeat. Despite their hopes, they had played right into Papa's plans. She had been certain he would use whatever trick made the dark room effective, but she had thought he and Twelve would have been inside with them. Instead, he had them trapped in a cage.

"Come on," Mike said, not ready to give up without a fight. "There's got to be another way out of here. Or a way to shut off whatever is blocking you."

Heading in opposite directions, Mike and Eleven began to search the outer wall of the building, looking for anything that might work as a way out. Behind a large stack of crates against one wall, Eleven found a large door for trucks to unload their shipments. Unfortunately, this too resisted all her attempts to grab hold of the metal and pry it free. As the two continued circling the outer wall, Hopper and Kali remained in the center of the room. Both were weak from their torture at the hands of Twelve and were fighting just to keep on their feet. Suddenly, Hopper noticed a faint sound from somewhere nearby.

"Everyone quiet," he ordered, halting Mike and Eleven who turned to look at him. "Does anyone else hear that?"

They all turned slowly about, trying to pick out where the faint beeping was coming from. Mike zeroed in on it first, walking quickly over to the shipping crate near the chairs where Hopper and Kali had been restrained minutes before. It looked like all the rest of the crates in the building, but it was definitely emitting a soft, beeping tone every few seconds. After watching Mike struggle with the top of the box, secured tightly in place, Eleven reached out a hand and ripped the lid free as she walked up. Mike stared in shock at the contents inside.

"A bomb?" he asked in disbelief, "He's going to get rid of us with a bomb?"

The device inside the crate looked like something out of a cheesy spy movie; a huge stack of explosive charges sat wired to a complicated detonator, complete with a convenient timer counting down to their ultimate demise. It was so comical, Mike almost laughed, but he knew how deadly serious the situation had become. This was no movie, and as far as any of them could tell, those were very real explosives ready to go off, and none of them had the first clue how to disarm the device.

It was Hopper who shook everyone out of their stupor as the timer passed 30 seconds on its way down to zero. "Everyone get to the far side of the room, behind those crates," he shouted as he began to drag a terrified Kali toward what little protection he could find for the group.

Taking up positions behind the boxes and hoping beyond hope it would be enough cover, the four huddled down and prepared for the end. In their final seconds, they exchanged hasty farewells, talking over one another to offer what comfort or apology they could.

"I'm so sorry for dragging you all into this."

"I'm sorry I couldn't keep you safe."

"I never meant for any of this to happen."

"It's not your fault. None of this is your fault."

"I love you, so much."

They crouched there, bracing themselves for what would come. Would it hurt or would the end come so fast they would never even know? Mike and Eleven held tight to one another, faces buried in each others shoulders. Hopper had his good arm around Eleven's shoulder and did his best to wrap around both of them, offering what meager protection he could to his little girl, and the boy he would have been proud to one day call his son. Knowing she was an outsider to the moment, Eleven reached out one hand and grasped Kali's, pulling her close as well. If they had to face the end, she was glad it was among the people that she loved. She hoped they knew just how much she loved them, as she felt their own love flowing through her.

In a sudden moment of clarity the answer came to her, and she knew what she had to do. Standing again, dragging the confused trio with her, she turned to face the crate slowly counting down to their destruction.

"Jane, what are..." Hopper began, before stopping, seeing her head droop forward, her eyes fixed in a hard glare on the crate. It was a look he was all too familiar with and he understood it was their only hope.

As the timer ticked its final seconds, Eleven closed her eyes and wrapped her whole being around the deadly charge, bracing for the impact she was now certain she could face, to keep the ones she

loved safe. Their love gave her all the strength she could ever need.

2....1....0....

The explosion was incredible. In an instant, the create was ripped to pieces by a raging torrent of destructive fire. It took only one look for Hopper to realize the crates they stood behind would do nothing to stop the blast and it would only be another moment before the entire building was torn to pieces around them. A wall of heat preceded the flames like a hot desert wind and Hopper turned his head to one side, shutting his eyes against the end that rushed onward toward them.

A moment later, he felt the heat dissipate, realizing the end had not come for them. Turning to look in the direction of the create, now a hunk of charred and twisted metal on the warehouse floor, he was struck breathless at the sight. Behind some unseen barrier, the explosion raged on but it had ceased its outward thrust. As he stared in disbelief, the torrent of flame began to shrink inward upon itself until it was reduced to a single brilliant point, far too bright to look at. In another second, the light winked out and was gone.

Drained, Eleven dropped to her knees and pitched forward, catching herself before crashing to the ground. She knelt there, panting hard, trying to catch her breath. Blood poured from her nose, unheeded, and fell to the cold concrete floor below. The love that had strengthened her through the moment fell away and a seething rage took its place.

"He tried to kill me," she thought. "He didn't want to capture me. He wanted to finish me."

Leaning down, Mike laid a steady hand on her shoulder. "El, are you alright?"

Not hearing his voice, not feeling his touch, she breathed harder, her whole body practically vibrating with raw energy.

"Papa tried to kill me," she whispered. "He tried to kill all of you."

Kneeling beside her, Hopper joined in trying to pull her back from the emotional cliff she was sprinting toward. "Jane, it's okay. We're

all okay."

"Papa. Tried. To KILL ME," she growled.

Barely aware of the concerned assembly beside her, Eleven rose to her feet. Her eyes were dilated wide and shone jet black, all softness gone from her gaze. Dark veins of energy raised along her neck, up her cheeks and across her brow. Stalking toward the door with a singular purpose, she reached out and ripped it from the wall, frame and all. Whatever measures Dr. Brenner had put in place to contain her buckled under the intense energy now flowing through her. Stepping out into the bright June sunlight, she closed her eyes for a brief second; just long enough to locate the target of her fury. She began walking with a firm resolve to end things, once and for all.

Aboard the plane, Dr. Brenner checked his watch for the third time in as many minutes. He had hoped to be airborne already, but the winds had dictated taking off to the north. That had meant an extra few minutes taxiing to the south end of the runway, uncomfortably close to the warehouse. The trap was sprung and the the critical moment should have come and gone by now. He had heard no explosion, though there had been enough explosives in the crate to have reduced the warehouse to a smoldering crater. So she had contained it, at least to some extent, he surmised. Now the waiting game would begin. Had she perished in the hellish inferno, along with the brat, the boy and the cop? Or would she be coming for him, a crazed hunter ready to chase him to the ends of the earth? The field in the walls of the building would keep her contained for a while at least, he was quite certain. If she had survived, she would eventually work her way free and find him, and the final phase of his plan would take shape. He would make her see just how powerful she was and how it had been his guiding hands that had helped her to become what she was truly meant to be. Yes, it would take convincing, but she would come around and take her proper place at his side.

He settled back into his seat as the engines wound their way up, preparing for takeoff. As their whine reached a feverish pitch, he felt the pilot release the brakes and they began rolling down the runway, rapidly picking up speed. Moments before the pilot pulled back on the controls to lift off, the plane slammed to a sudden halt, as though grabbed by a gigantic fist. The engines screamed against this new

restraint, fighting to continue forward. Suddenly, both engines were ripped free of their mounts near the tail and went tumbling off down the runway, propelled by the latent trust still pouring out of their rapidly slowing turbines. Several small fires ignited along their paths as fluids from the now severed fuel lines met with the white-hot gases still exiting the tumbling hunks of metal.

Twelve let out a startled yelp of terror and looked to Brenner, wanting to ask what had happened but unable to form the words.

His demeanor unbroken, he simply stated "It would seem that Eleven has caught us."

As if on cue, the door of the plane - along with a large portion of the fuselage around it - suddenly ripped free and went hurtling off into the grass bordering the runway. Unbuckling the belt across his lap, Dr. Brenner stood and straightened his necktie. Nodding to Twelve, indicating she should join him, he said, "I believe it is time for you to meet your sister."

27. Sisters Meet

Sisters Meet

McChord Air Force Base

Tacoma, WA

June 25, 1986

Ignoring the pleas to stop coming from behind her, Eleven stormed forward across the grass and onto the runway, approaching the hole she had just torn into the side of the now crippled plane. In the bright afternoon sun, her eyes blazed a deep red, like blood on fire. The air around her practically crackled with electricity as she sought out the target of her rage, still enclosed within the metal tube. Behind her, Mike and a shattered Hopper helped along the barely conscious Kali. They had shared a knowing look after seeing the transformation that had come over Eleven; Hopper had seen the look just once before, the night she closed the gate, and it had nearly killed her. Still, they knew that whatever was about to happen was entirely out of their hands now.

She reached the plane and was preparing to climb inside when Dr. Brenner stepped up to the hole with Twelve by his side. For a moment, the three simply stared at one another. On Twelve's face was a strange mix of confusion over what had happened and a determined anger to protect her Papa from harm. On Brenner's was a disgusting look of utter pride; his grand experiment had worked out exactly as he always knew it would. Eventually, Twelve jumped the short distance to the ground and started toward her sister, unseen by Eleven as she fixed her hateful gaze on her Papa.

"You tried to kill me," she accused.

"Yes," he replied, as though it were the most natural thing to have done.

Arms still by her side, she reached forth and grabbed him, dragging

him out of the plane and held him in the air as she threw the force of her grasp around his neck. She had shown Ray mercy, knowing he had been manipulated by evil and not wanting to deprive two little girls of their father. Papa was not worthy of such mercy, she thought, as she tightened her grip. Suddenly, she felt her hold pulled loose by a force of resistance. It was only then she realized her sister was standing halfway between them, glaring hard at Eleven while she held one hand raised toward Brenner, prying her grasp free.

"Let go of Papa," Twelve growled.

"No," she returned, throwing up a hand of her own to strengthen her grip.

"Let. Him. GO," she said, pouring out all her strength, desperate to pry Eleven's grip from him. The first drops of blood began to fall from her nose as she fought.

Brenner hung there, suspended several feet above the ground. He should have been terrified as his little girls pulled him to-and-fro, fighting over him the way sisters might fight over a treasured doll. Instead, his face was a calm mask of amusement and utter pride. "She's finally complete," he thought with a small smile. Eleven was everything he had hoped for and more.

Finally, Twelve's grip faltered and Eleven took the upper hand. While still suspending Brenner in the air, Eleven held her sister at bay as Twelve fought to overcome the resistance keeping her from Papa. Twelve's struggle lessened as she pondered her sister. Papa had always told her she was the strongest and that Eleven was weak and scared. How was it possible that this girl was holding her back now, without even breaking a sweat? She wasn't even using her full strength to keep her out as part of her focus was still being used to hold Papa in the air as well.

Barely noticed by Brenner and Twelve, the weary trio had finally caught up with Eleven, still reeling at the shock of what they had just survived. As they approached the edge of the runway, where dry grass met concrete, they suddenly found themselves unable to take another step forward. In addition to restraining both Brenner and her sister, she was holding them back as well, not wanting them to get

hurt in the showdown taking place beside the plane.

Eleven finally spoke, never taking her eyes off Brenner. "Why did you try to kill me?"

"It was a test, to see if you could stop me," he replied, as calm as ever. "I wanted to see if you were strong enough to come home to your Papa and continue our work."

Eleven was startled at the effect Brenner's voice was having on her. She hated the man with every fiber of her being and yet, hearing that calm, even voice, she felt like a little girl again. She found herself desperate for his praise and terrified of his disappointment all over again.

"Your powers have grown to an amazing strength," he continued. "I think you've even surpassed your sister at this point, just as I always knew you would."

Twelve snapped her head around and stared at Brenner, her mind in shock at what he had just said. "He always said I was the strongest," she thought, "It has to be a trick. Papa's trying to fool her into letting her guard down. That has to be it, right?"

Brenner reveled in the look of confusion on both faces staring back at him. As strong and independent as both of them thought they had become, they were still his little girls, now and always. His praise or disappointment still meant everything to them.

"Papa?" Twelve began, her mind a confused storm of hurt.

"Of course she is stronger than you," he went on. "She's splitting her focus and still holding you back. This can't be a surprise. How do you think you finally managed those trials in the desert?"

Both girls stared back at him in stunned silence and he almost laughed at their confusion.

"Who do you think helped you hold back those last two blasts on the range? You couldn't do it on your own, so your sister had to step in and do it for you. She managed it from almost 2000 miles away when you couldn't do it in person." He turned his attention to a bewildered

Eleven. "I knew you were there that day; I felt it as soon as you got in the car with us. I learned a long time ago what it felt like when you found me in the void and locked onto my mind. You were seeking me out with your mind long before you even knew what you were doing. You stood on the ridge with me that day and watched your sister fail time and again. It was no coincidence the last two - the ones she finally contained - were the two where you left me. I don't know how do you did it, but you've clearly become the strong sister, and I'm so proud of you."

He paused, letting the revelations sink in.

"Papa," Twelve began, barely containing the hurt in her voice. "You said I was the strong one. You said you were proud of me, and that there was nothing I couldn't do. You said she could never do the things I was able to do."

Unmoved by the turmoil of her world crashing down around her, he responded flatly, "Sure, there was a time you were stronger than Eleven, but those days have long passed. While she grew strong, you grew into a disappointment. Unfortunately, you were all I had, so I told you what you needed to hear, in the hope it would help you improve."

Eleven felt a little more of her sister's strength ebb away as she came to the startling realization that Papa had been lying to her for years, to achieve his own goals. Eleven still had questions of her own, swirling through her mind as she tried to unravel his plan.

"If you knew I was there, why didn't you say anything?" she asked, desperate to understand his motivations.

"Oh, come now. I thought you would have figured that out by now." he said, almost laughing at her puzzlement. "I couldn't reveal my secret too early, there were things I needed you to see. I knew I could use it to draw you out once and for all." Glancing up at Hopper, standing unsteady in the grass, and then looking back at Eleven, he smiled. "How do you think I knew when to have your sister break his arm?"

A fresh anger flooded through her as she tightened her grip further

around his neck. She realized with sickening horror that it hadn't been a coincidence that her timing was perfect to witness the final torturous event that spurred them into action that morning. Papa had planned it carefully and waited until he knew she was there to give the order he knew would bring her running to the rescue. Even knowing that he was laying his traps, she had fallen right into his hands all the same.

Despite having difficulty drawing a breath, Brenner continued to look at Eleven with calm composure. "Let go of my neck, Eleven," he gently commanded.

She shook her head, fighting to hold onto her resolve, though the grip on his neck loosened all the same.

"See, you can't kill me, Eleven." he began. "I've raised you since you were a baby. I helped you grow, helped you to be strong. Look at everything you can do, because of your Papa."

Her resolve faltered again as his familiar, commanding voice worked its way deep into her subconscious. Somehow, even though she knew what he was saying was all lies, it felt like truth just because it was Papa telling her. She fought hard against the influence of his voice and reminded herself that her power was hers alone; he only ever wanted to use it to do bad things.

"Your place is with me, and with your sister," he continued. "We're your family, Eleven. It's time to come home."

"Home. There's that word again," she thought. She had spent years after leaving the lab trying to figure out just what that meant for her. A place to belong. A place where she was loved. A place where she was understood. She had found that with Hopper, and with Mike. Hadn't she?

Seeing he was breaking through to her, he went on, indicating the group assembled behind her. "I know you think these people are your family; that they understand you. What kind of a monster will you be, in their eyes, if you kill me? They'll never truly know you and understand just what a special girl you are, not like your Papa. This boy? A young man pulled to-and-fro by his hormones. He may say he

loves you, he may even believe it himself. But what happens when some new girl comes along and his interest wanes? What happens when he decides you're too strong for him, that he can't deal with the amazing things you are capable of? Will he feel emasculated and leave? Will he demand you stop using your gifts?"

"He wouldn't do that," she growled, her anger renewed at the very thought that Mike would ever just discard her like that. Mike would never do that, would he? Everything Papa said was lies, but what if he was right?

"The stronger you get, the more these people will come to fear you. In the end, they will all betray you." He threw Hopper the satisfied look of someone about to spill closely guarded secrets. "Do you think you can ever really trust them? The boy? Your chief? Who do you think led me to you at the school that night? You're beloved chief handed you over on a silver platter the very first chance he got, all to save some insignificant boy."

A new fire of rage lit in her eyes. "Daddy. Doesn't. LIE!" she screamed, slamming Brenner back against the side of the plane. "He already told me everything about that night. And I forgave him."

Though winded by the impact, Brenner was nonetheless pleased with the reaction he was eliciting from her. He knew her resolve was breaking down. She would soon realize where she truly belonged.

"I know you've read the journals I kept, so you know that not everything I told you was true. There were things I had to hold back, to nurture your special gifts, but I never hid what my true intentions were. Yes, I worked tirelessly to shape you into a weapon of incredible strength. I'm sure these people who claim to love you have told you what a terrible thing that was. But surely you have come to see that the world could be a better place with people like you, trained to do what no-one else can. Do you remember when I taught you about World War Two, and the bad man, Adolf Hitler? How many lives could have been saved if there had been someone like you, able to find him wherever he hid, to steal his secrets and bring his terrible destruction to a swift end? No one else but you can do things like that. Not the other children we tested. Not even your sister has the kinds of abilities necessary to save millions of people

around the world. You could save them all, but you chose to run. You ripped open the portal, let loose the creature inside and then ran away. How many people died because you ran away from the mess you created? If you had stayed, we could have fixed the mistake and continued our work. There are still monsters in the world, Eleven, far more terrifying and destructive than that creature you let loose. You are the key to stopping them, and saving all those whose lives they threaten every day."

A still silence fell over the runway as Brenner concluded his monologue. Twelve continued to fight against Eleven's grip, though her heart wasn't fully in it. Suddenly, she found herself doubting every line of praise or gently-spoken truth Papa had ever presented her with. Meanwhile, Brenner smiled in satisfaction witnessing the turmoil painted on Eleven's face; he knew he had broken through to her. Although she continued to temporarily re-tighten her grip as she processed everything he had just said, he could feel her overall grasp loosening. Eleven's mind was a raging storm of emotion and doubt. She knew Papa was a liar; all he had ever done was manipulate her for his own purposes. But what if he was right? She had spent a year in high school and watched countless couples meet, date and ultimately break up. She and Mike were different, though, weren't they? Daddy promised he would never let her go and he's not a liar, right? But what if she was wrong. With Papa, at least she knew what she was getting. No matter how much Mike tried to convince her otherwise, she knew deep down that she was the one who had opened the gate in the first place and so many people had died before she was finally able to close it again. What if Papa was right about the bigger evils in the world? If she went with him, she could keep Mike and Daddy and everyone else she cared about safe. But it could also be a trick, another of his traps baited with lies. Her mind raced around and around in circles, searching for the right thing to do. At the same time, she felt herself beginning to tire under the combined effort of holding back Twelve, suspending Papa and keeping Daddy and Mike from coming any closer. All she wanted to do was find a small, dark place to curl up and make the whole world go away, but she knew that was impossible. So onward her mind flew, weighing the possibilities. Kill Papa and become a monster? Go with Papa and keep those she cared about safe? Her grip around Brenner's neck continued to loosen. Whatever she chose, people would be hurt,

maybe the best she could do was to go with him.

The silence was finally broken by a single gunshot that rang out across the deserted airfield around them, snapping everyone's focus to attention. Dr. Brenner looked down in shock. At first, no wound was visible, but within seconds a bright red flower began to blossom across the left breast of his crisp, white shirt. He looked up and coughed, the first drops of blood rising from his lungs on the outgoing breath. He looked around calmly, seeking out who had taken what he knew was a fatal shot. Locking eyes with the shooter, he realized it should have come as no surprise. He looked one last time upon his little girls, a small smile curling up the corners of his mouth. Moments later, his head slumped to the side, the light leaving his eyes forever.

Off in the grass, Mike Wheeler lowered the rifle and let it hang once more from the strap around his shoulders, a gentle plume of smoke still wafting from the barrel. He had seen the look on her face, the turmoil and hopelessness; Brenner had gotten through to her and she was all but convinced that returning to his side was the right thing to do. It wasn't what he had pictured, when he promised to save her at all costs, but when the moment came, he recognized it all the same.

All eyes turned and stared at him with shocked amazement at what he had done. Hopper looked over at the boy, scarcely believing he had it in him to pull the trigger. Once more, Mike Wheeler had saved his little girl; this time from the agony of having to kill the man who had raised her and had almost succeeding in convincing her she was nothing more than a weapon who belonged at his side. Eleven looked unbelieving at Mike, a small, sad smile on her lips. She knew she would never be able to thank him enough for doing that, saving her from the agony of choosing between impossible options.

She turned back to her Papa's lifeless body, the red blossom on his shirt continuing to spread. No longer a threat, she lowered his body to the ground and laid him out gently on the pavement. Looking at him, Papa, the man who had raised her, she felt everything and nothing all at once. Turning to face her sister, she saw the girl was staring at the lifeless form with shocked despair on her face. Twelve was no longer fighting her grasp, so she let it drop. Immediately, Twelve ran over to Brenner's body and wrapped her arms around

him.

"Papa!?" she screamed. "No, Papa! Please wake up, Papa!. Don't leave me!" She collapsed on him then, her head against his chest, sobbing. "Papa, come back. Please don't go. Please don't leave me."

Eleven's heart broke for her sister. She wasn't evil. She wasn't bad. She was helpless little girl who had been brainwashed and shaped by Papa, just like he had tried to do with her. She just stood there, watching the lost girl pour out her grief on the silent runway.

Suddenly remembering she wasn't alone, Twelve looked up from Brenner's body, her hair matted grotesquely to the side of her face by his blood. She fixed her gaze first on Eleven, the tears in her eyes replaced with a burning rage. A moment later, her stare slid off Eleven and focused squarely on Mike.

"You! You did this!" she screamed. In a single burst, she grabbed Eleven and threw her sideways against the plane while slamming Mike across the grass and onto his back, knocking all the air from his lungs. She reached out to drag him to his feet again when she felt her grip blocked by Eleven.

"Don't you dare touch him," Eleven snarled.

Twelve turned around and squared off against her sister. "This is YOUR fault," she screamed. "Why didn't you die like you were supposed to?"

Throwing all her hatred behind it, she broke through her sister's defense and flung Eleven backward along the runway. Catching herself inches above the ground, Eleven stood and threw every ounce of strength she could muster against her sister, fighting to get a grasp of her own. It was a battle of wills as each tried to both grab hold of the other, while blocking the attempt coming back at them. She realized with a sinking dread that, among the many traits she and her sister shared, Twelve's strength had risen considerably with the seething rage now coursing through her. All at once, she broke through and got a grip on Eleven, raising her off the ground.

"Papa always told me you were bad," she accused, "He told me all

about the terrible things you did and all the people that died because of you. He promised Mama, before she died, that he would keep us safe, raise us to be good, and now he's dead. All because of YOU!"

"Papa tells lies," Eleven countered, hoping there were some way to break through and help her sister see Papa for what he really was. "Papa stole us from Mama and convinced her we died. She never even knew there were two of us."

"What does that matter? She was dying anyway."

"She wasn't dying. She fought to get us back and Papa broke her mind," Eleven explained, still not sure how to describe the state he had left Mama's brain in. "Mama's still alive, Twelve."

Twelve's grip faltered just long enough for Eleven to break free and drop to the ground. She landed hard and rolled to the side, trying to dodge her sister's grab to regain control. Still, she couldn't get a grasp of her own on Twelve.

"You're lying. Papa told me all about you, all the terrible things you did. You let the creature out. You're the reason we had to leave home. You're..." she fought back a sob, "You're the reason Papa got hurt. You're the reason Miss Connie died."

Eleven had to think for a moment before the name solidified in her mind. Connie Fraizer, one of Papa's loyal agents; he had said to always address her as Miss Connie. She had only encountered the woman a few times, but each was a terrible memory. She brought her dinner once, when Papa was away from the lab, and had slapped her and taken away the meal untouched when Eleven had asked where the milk was that normally came with dinner. And, of course, she had been the one who killed Benny, the nice man who tried to help her when she escaped. She had nothing but hatred for the woman, and it had almost felt good when it became necessary to kill her. It was clear that Twelve's memories of the woman were far more pleasant than her own.

"You've spent your whole life by his side, so I understand you can't see it yet. But Papa was a monster. He never cared at all about either of us. We were just tools he was trying to shape to achieve his own

twisted goals." Eleven countered.

In a sudden surge of rage, Twelve managed to grip Eleven's legs and drag them out from under her, dropping her to the ground again.

"You hurt Papa, and now you're the reason he's gone. You, and that boy you care so much about." Locking eyes with Mike, but continuing to address Eleven, she went on. "I'm going to make him pay for what he did. Every hurt you caused Papa, I'm going to inflict on him one thousand times over. He's going to beg me to kill him, and I won't give him the satisfaction. And you are going to watch every second of it."

Realizing there was going to be no way to reason with her sister, Eleven dropped the pretence of holding back Mike and the rest of them, and threw her full strength at Twelve, quickly overthrowing her grip and tightening her own around her panicked sister. She slammed Twelve to her knees, pinned both arms behind her back and she rose to her own feet and walked slowly over.

"You won't lay a finger on Mike, or anyone else." Eleven growled, her eyes thin slits of anger.

Twelve fought with everything she had against Eleven's grasp, but it quickly became clear that she was no match for her sister.

Kneeling in front of her sister, Eleven tried to reach her with a gentler touch. "I know you're angry; that's all Papa taught you. It doesn't have to be this way."

Straining hard against her sister's hold, Twelve dropped her voice to little more than a whisper. "I will kill you."

Realizing that there was no other course of action, Eleven fought to push her own mind into Twelves and subdue her as she had with the guards earlier. Twelve did her best to resist, but Eleven could feel her sister's strength begin to fade and after one final lunge with everything she had left, Eleven managed to get where she needed to be. Breaking through, Eleven took hold of her sister's mind, cutting off her conscious control and brought her harmlessly into submission. Still, Twelve's unconscious mind fought to free her from her sister's

grip and Eleven knew it would only be moments before she was loose and on her feet again. She was at a complete loss as to what to do with her sister, this terrified girl who had just lost everything.

As she wrestled with the decision of just what to do, the others walked over to join her. As much as he wanted to help, Hopper knew that this fell far outside anything he or Mike could do for her. Kali took another step forward and in that moment, the entirety of the world collapsed down to the three of them; Eight, Eleven and Twelve. Sisters in blood and sisters in circumstance.

"What are you waiting for? Kill her," Kali began, abruptly. Realizing she had been a little too callous, she continued "She's too dangerous to let go. She'll never stop trying to hunt you down; to hunt all of us," she added, looking first at Mike, then at Hopper.

"She's not bad," Eleven began, fighting back the tears beginning to form in her eyes. First Papa and now this, her emotions were taking hold and she knew her grip would fail from exhaustion soon. "Papa twisted her into a weapon, just like he tried to do with us. His lies are all she knows."

"All the more reason it has to be done. If all she has are Papa's lies, there is no hope for her," she urged. "I'll do it for you, if you need me to" she continued, glancing back at Mike, and the rifle still slung on his shoulder.

Mike stepped forward then and Kali thought he was bringing her the gun, but instead he stepped up behind Eleven and laid a hand on her shoulder. Though she hadn't seen him approach, she knew immediately it was him. His fingers radiated a warmth she would recognize anywhere. A pure, tender love flowed from his touch and she let her eyes slide closed, shutting out the world and trying to think.

"What do I do?" she asked herself. She thought of Papa and all his lies. She thought of Kali, and Mike and Daddy. Twelve didn't have anyone like them to support her and help her heal. Would death be more merciful? What would Mama think? What would Mama have named her? She never even knew she had a second little girl, lost to Brenner, and she never would. She had fought so hard to get her little

Jane back, whichever of them that really was, and she never even knew she had a second daughter somewhere else in the building. Papa only gave her lies; lies she mistook for love. Mama would have given her real love.

She knew what she had to do, and hoped it was the right choice. She reached deep into Twelve's mind, searching for the place that would bring all of this to an end. It was deeply buried and hard to reach, as this was all still so new, but she found it. She could feel the remains of Twelve's subconscious fighting to keep her out but its own strength was fading as well. Eleven wrapped invisible fingers around the point and took a deep breath, steadying herself for what she was about to do.

"I'm so sorry," she whispered, sadly, into her sister's mind.

SNAP.

Eleven slowly slid her eyes open again, and looked down at her sister, now slumped over on her side. Her eyes stared blankly ahead, unseeing. Mike dropped to his knees and wrapped both arms around Eleven's shoulders, giving her support but entirely at a loss for what to say. Kali and Hopper just stared, trying to grasp what they had just witnessed. One minute she was there, the struggle evident on her face, and the next, all the light was gone from her eyes.

"I'm sorry," Eleven whispered again, out loud this time, as the tears began to break free and run slowly down her cheeks.

28. Hope

Hope

McChord Air Force Base

Tacoma, WA

June 25, 1986

"I'm sorry," Eleven whispered again, out loud this time, as the tears began to break free and run slowly down her cheeks. She gazed down sadly at her sister, as Twelve's lips pulled back into the slightest hint of a smile.

"I caught it, Papa," she mumbled. "Papa is so proud of me."

Mike, Hopper and Kali stared in breathless silence, trying to reconcile what they were seeing. Eleven just looked blankly at her sister, hoping it had been the right thing to do.

"Hide and seek. I found them, Papa! Cherry suckers are my favorite."

"How..." Hopper began. He stopped, unsure just what to even ask. "What happened?"

"Dream Circle," she replied, sadly. "Like Mama."

Utterly spent, Eleven buried her face into Mike's chest and sobbed. She had condemned her sister to be locked away, trapped inside her own mind just like Mama. Was she really any better than Papa for doing that? The only consolation she could grant herself was the fact that she had pulled Twelve's happiest memories to the surface before she locked her mind shut. She would forever be Papa's happy little girl, doing all the things that made him just so proud of her. She wouldn't be haunted by his betrayal, or his death, or the knowledge of her sister and the role she had played in everything that had happened to them.

Mike slowly turned his head and surveyed the wreckage all around

them. Unable to stay on their feet any longer, Hopper and Kali were sitting, leaned back to back for support. It was clear he was ready to pass out from the immense pain radiating from his shattered arm and she looked deathly pale from all she had endured over the last week. Twelve lay on her side, softly muttering away her happiest memories. Beyond her, the late Dr. Martin Brenner lay in a pool of blood. When the moment had come, Mike had been surprised at how easy the decision had been to pull the trigger and save her. The full gravity of the situation would probably come crashing down around him later, but for now, he consoled himself with the fact it had been the right thing to do. Finally, beyond the body lay the wrecked remains of the plane. Since Brenner and Twelve had emerged from the wreckage unharmed, he was confident the pilots were fine and had smartly stayed out of sight and away from the surreal events taking place outside. He had to admit, it had been incredible watching her grab hold of the plane and slam it to a stop, ripping off the engines and tearing a hole in the side as though it were made of paper. Her strength had grown to incredible levels since her stay in the hospital and he couldn't help but think something she experienced while unconscious had fostered this growth. He knew Brenner had been wrong about the two of them. Far from being intimidated or emasculated by her incredible power, he felt nothing but pride for the girl he loved. They completed each other in ways his twisted mind would have never understood.

Hearing the approach of vehicles from behind them, Mike stood, pulling Eleven with him. Base security was rapidly approaching and the scene would be in chaos in moments. He felt her body tense as she saw the soldiers coming for them and watched as she slowly ducked her head, preparing her mind to fight once more.

Laying a calming hand on her shoulder, he softly said, "Not this time."

Looking up at him in startled confusion, she asked, "What then?"

"We let them take us. We don't fight. These aren't Brenner's men. It will be okay," Mike said. "I promise."

Those two simple words put her mind at ease and she nodded. "Okay, if you're sure."

Before the soldiers were close enough to perceive it as a threat, Mike slipped the rifle off his shoulder and pulled Hopper's revolver out of his pocket. Laying both gently on the ground, he stepped away from the firearms. Taking Eleven's hand in his own, they walked over to Hopper and Kali to wait. He pulled her into a tight embrace and they clung to one another.

"I promise, we're going to be alright," he repeated. "Whatever happens, I love you El"

"I love you too, Mike," she whispered, pulling him tighter to herself.

Seconds later, security reached them, rifles drawn, and ordered them to the ground. After securing the scene, paramedics were brought in and Kali, Hopper and Twelve were quickly assessed and secured to stretchers. As Hopper was loaded into a waiting ambulance, he caught Eleven's gaze long enough to mouth 'I love you,' which she immediately mouthed back, fighting to hold back her tears and knowing she needed to be strong for him. Shifting his eyes to Mike, he again gave the 'take care of her' look, to which Mike responded with a gentle nod. As the three were taken away under guard to the base hospital, Mike and Eleven were handcuffed, searched and placed in the back of a waiting car.

The MPs wasted no time and began with the interrogation as they drove across the base. Mike answered most of the questions for both of them and laid out the story as it had happened. It sounded too fantastical to believe, though the officers could provide no better explanation for the dismantled aircraft, the obliterated warehouse or the catatonic twin currently being taken away for evaluation.

After another quick search for concealed weapons, Mike's wallet was confiscated and the two were un-cuffed and placed into neighboring holding cells. Before leaving them, the officers warned it would probably be quite a wait as there were more than a few things that had to sorted out to even begin to corroborate their story.

Moments after the guards left their cells, Mike heard the lock unlatch on Eleven's cell and the door slide open. That was followed by his own unlocking and sliding open as well. Eleven stood there, nose red and eyes glistening as the shattered emotions of the day ran slowly

down her cheeks. She walked into his cell, siding the door shut and locking it again behind her.

"I didn't want to be alone." she said sadly.

"Come here," Mike said gently, holding open his outstretched arms.

Eleven walked over and sat on the bunk with him, settling into his lap and resting her head on his shoulder. Wrapping his arms around her, Mike settled back against the wall behind him, getting comfortable and knowing they would likely be sitting there for a while, until the soldiers could figure out what to do with them.

After several quiet minutes, wrapped up in each others arms, Eleven softly asked "Is he really gone?"

"Yeah, he's gone." Mike confirmed. "It's really over this time."

"Thank you," she said, leaning up to plant a kiss on his cheek. "I think he had me believing what he said. I don't think I could have done it myself."

"It's what we do: we catch each other when we fall and we do what has to be done to keep each other safe."

She nodded and curled herself tighter into Mike's embrace. Closing her eyes, she tried to shut out everything that wasn't the two of them.

As Mike and Eleven sat waiting in their cell, a flurry of activity was occurring elsewhere on the base. Kali and Twelve were placed in separate hospital rooms under armed guard, though neither was in any state to attempt an escape. Hopper was immediately taken in to surgery to begin the lengthy process of reconstructing his shattered arm.

Meanwhile, Mike and Hopper's wallets were searched in an attempt to determine just who they were dealing with. Behind each of their ids, which were quickly determined to be forgeries, the soldiers found matching business cards for Dr. Sam Owens, North Central Region Chief for the CIA. The cards included instructions to contact him directly in the event of an emergency. After verifying he was who the card claimed him to be, Dr. Owens was contacted and the unusual

situation was explained. Within hours he was on a plane headed west to come sort things out. After meeting with those who had been working tirelessly to clean up the day's messes, his next stop was to get Mike and Eleven released from the cells where they were being held. The guards were initially startled, upon opening Eleven's cell, to find the girl missing. However, even the most cynical of the guards couldn't help but melt just a little upon opening Mike's cell and finding the two of them fast asleep, wrapped in each others arms.

After waking them, Dr. Owens ushered them across the base to reunite with Hopper as he was recovering in the hospital. The doctors had spent hours piecing his arm back together and were confident he would eventually have full use of his right hand again, though it would probably take additional surgeries to completely repair the damage. Mike and Dr. Owens decided to give Hopper and Eleven a few minutes to reconnect in private before going in to join them, and instead went into the room next door to check on Kali. After a day of fluids and rest, and her more significant wounds having been cleaned and stitched, she was doing remarkably well.

"So, you must be Mike," she greeted as they walked in. "Jane's told me a lot about you."

"She's told me a lot about you too," he responded coldly. "Especially about the last time you two spoke a couple weeks ago."

Kali's eyes dropped with guilt. "I'm sorry. I know all this was my fault."

After stewing on this thoughts for a moment, Mike continued, "I'm certainly not okay with what you did. But she forgives you, so I forgive you too."

"Thank you," she said, finally meeting his gaze. Only then did her eyes glance over at the man who had come in with Mike.

"This is Dr. Owens," Mike introduced. "He's the reason we aren't being shuffled away to disappear right now."

"Nice to meet you," she greeted.

"Nice to meet you as well," Owens offered. "Sorry it couldn't be under better circumstances. I've actually been trying to get in touch with you for a few years now, but you're very good at covering your tracks. Feel up to leaving the room for a few minutes?" he asked, nodding his head toward the wheelchair parked in the corner of the room. "There's a few things we all need to discuss."

After helping her into the chair, Mike pushed her out the door and over to Hopper's room. It was clear that both father and daughter had shed more than a few tears, though neither was much inclined to hide the fact anymore. After everyone was thoroughly reunited, Dr. Owens spent the next few minutes explaining what had been happening while the four of them had been locked up and recovering.

"So, some good news," he began. "Once the doctors sign off on both of you, you'll all be free to go home. I'm sure you're getting used to it at this point, but all of you will need to forget any of this happened and keep it to yourselves. As far as any official reports are concerned, the plane suffered engine failure on takeoff. Dr. Brenner and his daughter were killed in the resulting crash. The pilots were so rattled by what happened, they are just fine with corroborating the story, and the plane has already been hauled off to be destroyed. The base commander is happy to be rid of him, and the last few politicians with any connection to Brenner are falling over each other to distance themselves from what remains of his work. I think you are all free and clear of anyone trying to come after you at this point."

He paused and let the good news sink in, before getting to the more sensitive question. "We do have one loose end that needs to be tied up. Jane, you have a twin sister who, despite the official reports, didn't die in a plane crash yesterday. I'm making arrangements to have her placed in a care facility in Chicago where we can keep a close eye on her. At some point, we'll need to know exactly what happened to her. For now, I just need to know if she is any kind of threat? From what I've heard, whatever you did to her brain has her completely zoned out; is there any chance of her coming back to her senses?"

"Only if I let her free," Eleven confirmed guiltily. Mike put a reassuring arm around her shoulder and she leaned into him.

"Good enough for now. I'll let you guys visit while I have a little chat with the doctors."

It was another two days before they were ready to release Hopper and Kali to fly home. Dr. Owens had offered to arrange a place for Mike and Eleven to stay on base, but she refused to leave Hopper's side. She decided if he could sleep in a chair by her side for a week, then she could do the same for him. At one point, a soldier arrived carrying the two black duffle bags, recovered from the station wagon. The location of the car was quietly slipped to local police, so it could be returned to its rightful owner. Checking the contents of the bag, Mike was surprised to find the shoulder holster with the revolver tucked safely inside. Catching Hopper's eye for a brief instant, Mike pulled the folded letter out of his pocket and tucked it quickly back into the pouch on the holster, for Hopper to do with as he wished once they were home.

The next day, the unusual group of six boarded the private jet Dr. Owens had arranged and took off toward home. Owens spent the majority of the flight reviewing stacks of reports detailing just how all of the arrangements were proceeding. Hopper and Kali slept for most of the flight, still on heavy doses of painkillers to aid in their recovery. Twelve sat buckled in her seat for the entirety of the flight, a serene smile plastered to her face, muttering softly about games of catch and cherry suckers. Eleven and Mike sat arm in arm, blissfully hopeful that things were truly over and perhaps she could live the quiet, peaceful life she deserves.

Hawkins, IN

August 12, 1986

July came and went with life gradually returning to normal for the extended Hopper family. The chief made an invitation to Kali, offering to turn his home office into a proper bedroom for her to stay with them. While she was grateful for the offer, the ideas of small-town life and family still felt too confining to her. As a consolation, Dr. Owens helped set her up with a real apartment in Indianapolis and a job to start establishing a stable life for herself. Still, she drove up to Hawkins about once a week for dinner with her new family. After so many years of running, the idea of settling down and

planting roots was more than a little scary but she fought her way through. To help her along, Dr. Owens kept a standing phone appointment with her every Tuesday evening, putting his psychology degree to good use and making sure she was doing alright.

Hopper was coming along well in his recovery, though as originally anticipated, he had required a second surgery in late July to repair the damage in his hand. Everyone at the station liked to tease him to no end about his arm. As far as any of them knew, he had taken a bad fall off a ladder while cleaning out his gutters and he desperately wanted to inform them all it was actually a telekinetic teenage sociopath that had been trying to torture information out him. Despite Owens' reassurances that they were no longer being hunted, he knew there was no way to drop the real story without outing Jane in the process, and it would cause no end of problems if the town knew of her abilities. So he kept his mouth shut and endured their good-natured ribbing.

As he had predicted, the nightmares settled in for Mike not long after their return to Hawkins. Some nights it was just reliving the events as they had occurred, right up to the point of shooting Brenner. Worse were the nights when he acted too late and Brenner managed to win her over and Eleven turned on all of them. The first time he had that one, he wound up on her front porch at two in the morning, sobbing and unsure how he had even arrived there as he was both bike-less and barefoot. For a change, she got to be the one to help piece him back together and assure him he had made the right decision and that she was, in fact, safe. Her own nightmares came back with a vengeance as well, and it wasn't long before Mike was sleeping at her house most nights. In the beginning, Hopper had insisted that Mike sleep on the couch but after finding them together on the living room floor for the third morning in a row, he relented and allowed them to share her bed. He laid out the ground-rule that her door stay open and the understanding that he would - and did - check on them randomly through the night. As much as his fatherly instincts screamed at him to send Mike home, he knew their mere presence at each other's side in the night did more for their healing than anything else could.

On August 9th, Mike proudly presented Eleven with her very own

telescope in honor of her real birthday. It had taken mowing countless lawns in addition to a small loan from Nancy to buy it for her, but it was all worth it for a smile of pure delight as she slid the bright paper off the box and realized what he had bought her. A few days later, he had an evening all planned out - much like what he planned back in June - for stargazing, helping her try out her telescope to get an up-close look at the moon and watching the Perseid meteor shower, which was expected to peak that night.

As the sun sank toward the horizon, Mike stood scraping the grill on Hopper's back porch. While the chief had insisted on doing the actual grilling himself, flipping burgers just fine with his left hand, he was more than happy to relinquish the hard cleanup work to Mike while he kicked back with a beer. As Mike worked away at the bits of charred beef, he looked out across the back lawn, his eyes falling on Eleven. She had a blanket spread out in the grass and was seated in the middle, back straight and eyes gently closed with the warm evening sunset sparkling off her face. He knew she was currently 100 miles away making an important weekly visit. No matter how many times he reassured her she had made the right decision, she still couldn't help but wonder if there was something more that could have been done and he understood the importance of these visits to her own healing.

A few minutes later, Eleven opened her eyes with a long sigh. She didn't know if it would ever be safe enough to unlock her sister's mind again, but she was willing to work on helping Twelve heal, as long as it took. Rising to her feet, she turned and found Mike standing right there, as she knew she would. He wrapped his arms around her and pulled her in close as she buried her face in his chest.

"How is she this week?" Mike finally asked, breaking the silence.

Eleven gave a noncommittal shrug. "A little better, I suppose. Instead of screaming the whole time, she just sat there and glared while I talked. I guess it's something," she added, brightening a little.

"It'll be up to her whether she's able to come out of this someday, but you're still doing more for her than any of the doctors can. She's lucky she has a sister who loves her enough to even try."

Looking deep into Mike's caring eyes, she marveled at all they had come through together. She knew in her heart, Papa was wrong about the two of them. Their love was real, and whatever came along, they would face it together. Eleven leaned in for a kiss as the first shooting-stars of the night began to streak their way across the sky.

Somewhere, locked deep inside her teenage mind, five year old Twelve smiled as she prepared for another game.

"Hide and Seek Papa! Count to fifteen. One. Two. Three. Four. Five. Six. Seven. Eight. Nine. Ten. Eleven."

She paused, her face slowly pulling down into a puzzled frown. Eleven; something about the number didn't feel right as she spoke it. The feeling only lasted a moment before she smiled and continued counting.

"Twelve. Thirteen. Fourteen. Fifteen. Ready or not, here I come!"

29. Epilogue

Epilogue

Evansville, IN

July 9, 1987

It had taken almost a year, but Eleven finally found what she was looking for. While the idea had nagged at the back of her mind almost from the beginning, it wasn't until she returned to school in the fall that she started her search in earnest. Every Saturday, Ms. White, the librarian, had a fresh stack of newspapers for her to dig through. There wasn't much information to go on and she knew it was a bit of a needle-in-a-haystack situation; Mike had explained that phrase as he helped her dig through the endless yellowed pages. She didn't even know exactly when or where it would have happened, if it had happened at all. Still, Eleven was confident she would recognize it once she saw it. Finally, all their work paid off as she read through the *Evansville Courier and Press* for Sunday June 22, 1986.

It is with great sadness that the family of George Collins announces his passing on Friday, June 20, 1986, at the age of 88 years. George was preceded in death by Jennifer, his wife of 66 years. Services are scheduled for this Tuesday, June 24th at Oak Hill Cemetery, where he will be laid to rest beside his beloved Jenny.

George and Jenny; she had found them. She knew it had to be him, and that meant everything that happened while she lay in that hospital bed had been real. She read the first line again, stopping on the date of his passing; June 20th was the same day she found her way home. He had helped her find her way, and then moved on to finally reunite with the woman he loved.

With summer jobs this year, it took a few days before their schedules lined up and Mike and Eleven could get away for a whole day. After getting the okay from Hopper, they loaded up Mike's car and made the drive across the state to pay their overdue final respects. It

occurred to them as they merged onto the highway and headed south that it was the first time they had left Hawkins, just the two of them. As they drove, Eleven recounted for Mike everything she could remember about her time in that other place and everything George did to help her get home. He had heard the story countless times but never grew tired of hearing her tell it; she could read the phonebook to him and he wouldn't mind one bit. He loved hearing her talk, such a change from the girl who barely spoke a few dozen words the whole first week he knew her.

On their way through Evansville, Eleven spotted a sign for Central High School. They couldn't help but laugh at the fact that tucked away in their respective wallets, they each still carried the forged student ids from Central that Hopper had prepared for them. It stuck them as fitting that the school they pretended to attend while on the run was where George had spent his career teaching English literature. Part of Eleven wished she could have actually been his student, though his obituary confirmed he had been retired for many years now so it wouldn't have happened for more than one reason.

Soon enough, they arrived at the cemetery and quietly crossed the lush, green lawns until they located the graves they were looking for. Kneeling together between George and Jennifer, Eleven carefully removed four roses from the box she was carrying and passed two of them to Mike. Together they laid the flowers on the pair of headstones and offered what thanks they could to these people they never knew, but whom they owed so much.

"Hi George, it's Jane," she began, not quite sure just what to say now that they were finally there. "I made it home, but I guess you already figured that out. I can't ever thank you enough for what you did. I don't know if I would have found my way back without your help."

Turning to address the other headstone, she continued. "Hi Jenny, I'm Jane. I'm sorry he took longer getting to you because of me. I hope you two are together again, living out your next adventure someplace really beautiful."

Mike took a turn then, adding his thanks to her own. "Hi George. I just want to say thank you. Thank you for helping her find her way back to me. We both would have been lost without you."

Eleven reached into her purse and fished out a special gift she had brought for George. She hadn't been sure whether it was a good idea or not, but Mike had reassured her it was perfect.

"I wasn't sure if you would have it, wherever you are now, so I want you to have my copy. I really liked it and I can see why you enjoyed a story about the long journey home," she said quietly as she laid a paperback copy of *Twenty-Thousand Leagues Under the Sea* beside the flowers.

Mike placed an arm around her and she laid her head on his shoulder. For a few minutes, all felt right with the world as they let the warm summer sunshine and a quiet afternoon breeze envelop them.

Author's Note:

And so our story draws to a close. Will Twelve remain forever trapped in the dream circle or will Eleven one day be able to let her free? Or will she find a way out on her own? Your guess is as good as mine, though I like to think someday Eleven will help her understand. I don't have any current plans for a sequel, but that could always change if the right inspiration strikes.

I want to take a few minutes and sincerely thank everyone who has taken the time to leave a review or send a PM, as well as everyone who has taken the time just to read this story. This is the first story of any significant length I have ever written, so the warm reception it has received is amazingly appreciated.

So what's next from darthstormer? Short answer: more ideas than time. I have a non-traditional work with some options in the works that I hope to post in the coming weeks. For those following *The Long Search*, and anxiously awaiting more, I haven't forgotten about you. I am working out the outline and timeline for *I Will Bring You Home*, which is Mike's story in the Long-Search AU. I really want to step carefully into to the story since we are spanning such a long timeline and will be going back and forth a bit. But rest assured, it is coming, and I promise you won't have to wait 353 days.

Once more, just a huge and heartfelt thanks to everyone for your support.

darthstormer